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THE BOUNTY HUNTERS

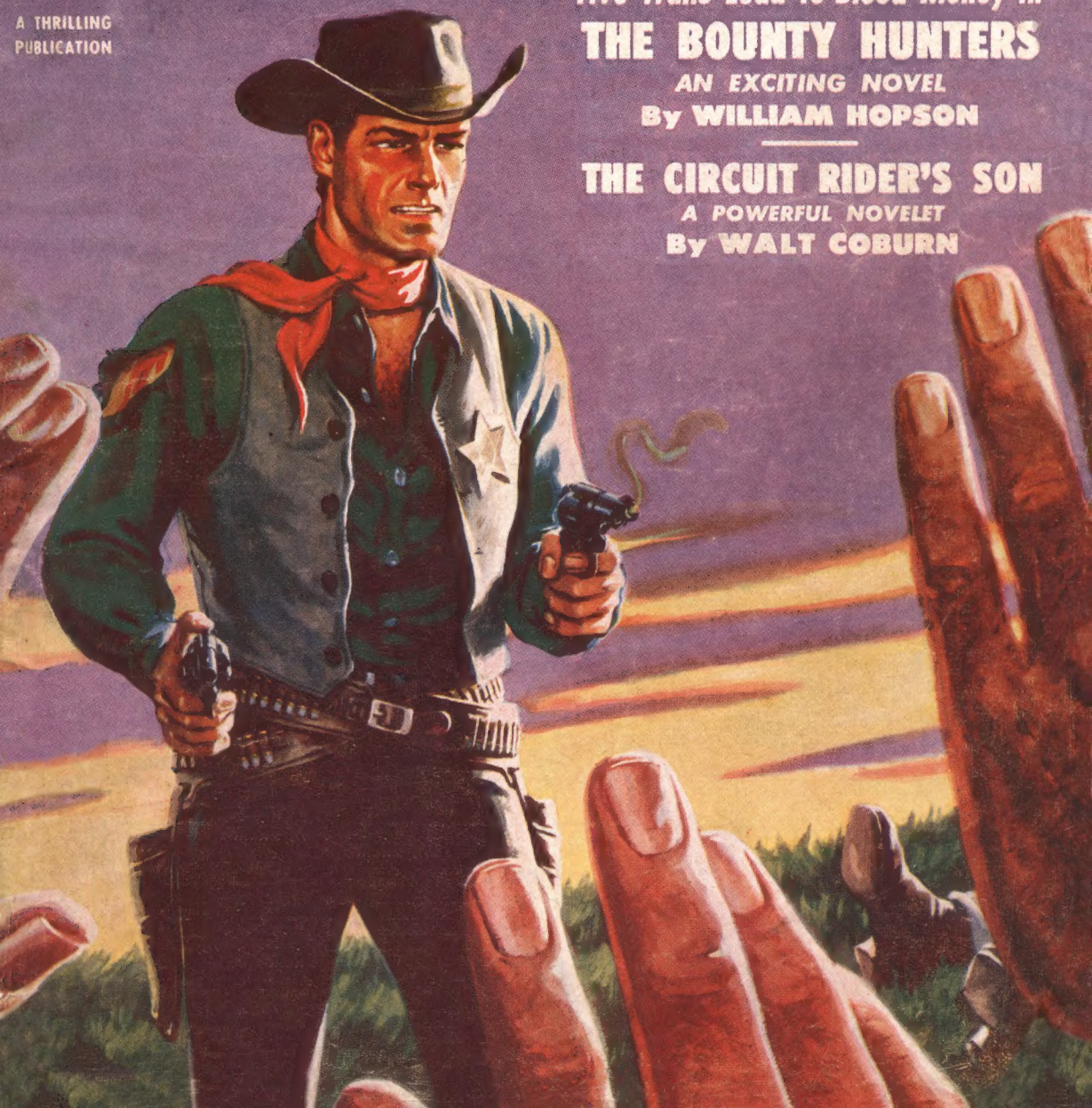
AN EXCITING NOVEL

By WILLIAM HOPSON

THE CIRCUIT RIDER'S SON

A POWERFUL NOVELET

By WALT COBURN



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Giant western

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

VOL. 8
NO. 2

OCTOBER
1951

A FULL-
LENGTH
NOVEL

THE BOUNTY HUNTERS.....William Hopson 12

Sworn enemies suddenly change to grudging allies when their trails converge on a strange rendezvous of death

A COMPLETE
NOVELET

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SAMUEL MINES, Editor

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The ABC's of SERVICING

How to Be a Success in RADIO-TELEVISION



A Department Conducted by FRANCIS H. AMES, Hunting and Fishing Expert

OCTOBER is the best month in the year for the outdoorsman. With game birds on the wing, deer and elk in the coverts, a great many of us head for the open country to camp out. There is a heap of fun in this if you know how to do it, a heap of misery sometimes if you don't. A great many folks take a half hitch around their camping pleasure by being short sighted on camping rigging and technique.

To me it is pitiful to see hombres scattered about the woods and along the streams with a thousand dollars apiece worth of guns, fishing tackle, binoculars and what have you, all carefully selected, and a camping outfit guaranteed to make them wish they'd stayed home.

Sure you're a tough hombre. You can get out and out-Daniel old man Boone if you have to. You'd harden into it in time. But this is not a work day event. This is supposed to be a pleasure trip, not a scouting foray among the Comanches in the days of Buffalo Bill. Buff Bill had buffalo robes—chances are you have a back-breaking load of grandmother's quilts.

Few folks like to rise in the morning with a crick in their backs, to limp about camp snapping ligaments back in place with one hand while they scratch insect bites with the other. No one really likes sand and ashes in their grub. It isn't effeminate to take care to be comfortable in camp—it's just downright smart.

Last fall I saw a bunch of dudes out with a salty cowboy for a guide. The dudes were spreading their blankets on the ground, privately sneering at the puncher for using a sleeping bag. And there you are, the only real outdoorsman in the outfit used a sleeping bag. I punched cattle for a number of years, in Montana, Oklahoma and Texas. I've slept on the hardest ground this side of Hades. Since that

time I've experimented with a lot of outlandish rigs. Here's what I use today.

A camping "must" is a light canvas tarp, 8x16, for over and under your bed, to be used as a wind break, for shelter from rain. In this roll the best down sleeping bag that you can afford. Wool or kapok will do, but down is best. Surplus army and airforce down bags can still be obtained, and often for less than a civilian wool bag. An air mattress is comfortable, light, compact. Lacking this you can make your mattress out of evergreen fronds, ferns or hay. Put a mosquito net over head and shoulders when you crawl in and enjoy a good night's rest.

Some folks lug along an assortment of pots, pans, kettles, dishes, that would break the spine of a strong mule, and rattle from here to the ridge and back. Cooking utensils nested in one compact kit of six quart capacity can be obtained at any sporting goods store, costs little.

I use a campfire because I love to watch the flames at night while I dream. I like the scent of wood-smoke. Sometimes I cook over such a fire—it is well to know how. But for quick, efficient, clean cooking, I use a quart measure sized G. I. stove on light trips, a two burner stove on car trips. I'm even foolish enough to take along a gasoline lantern at times. I always take a flashlight. A broken arm or leg at night can put a fast crimp in that fall outing.

A sound camping rig costs less than a good rifle. Maybe you'd like to take your wife along and have her enjoy it. A small tent isn't a bad idea. I never caught an Indian very far from his tepee, especially if his squaw was on the trail with him. Pawn that extra gun, if necessary, and get out there in comfort among the falling leaves.

For Questions and Answers, See Page 104

FOR PASSION... FOR POWER... HE BETRAYED HIS OWN COUNTRY!

A voluptuous Nazi "Princess" made Oliver forget his own country, his freedom, his job. Did the beer halls of Berlin and the friendship of power-crazed Germans make up for becoming an American exile in a world at war? You've heard about Americans selling out to the enemy.

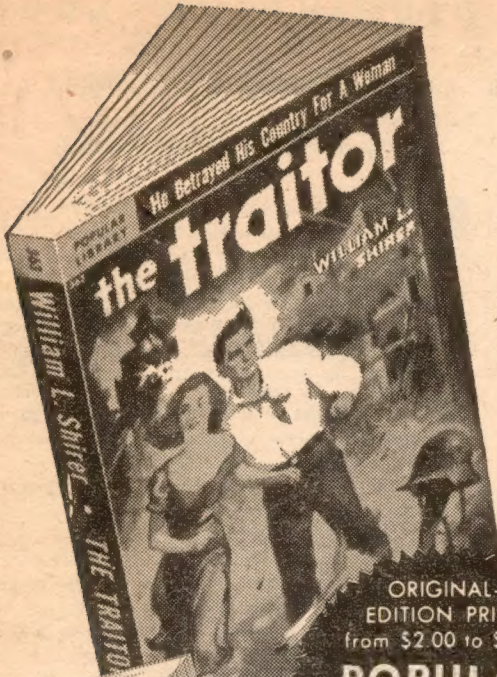
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by P. J. Wolfson

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DIGGING IN LUCK

True Stories of Leadville

By **NORMAN RENARD**

L EADVILLE, Colorado, is reputed to be one of the most mineralized sections in the world, and during its heyday great discoveries of gold and silver were made almost daily. In the camp's early days, H. A. W. Tabor, he of the Midas touch, who was later to become a bonanza king, was a small storekeeper.

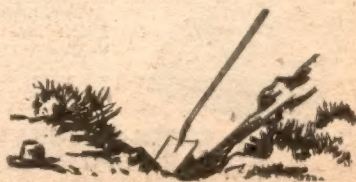
One day he grubstaked two greenhorn German shoemakers, and they started off to prospect. In the shade of a pine tree on a hill a mile above town, they stopped to rest and take a few swigs from a jug of whiskey they had filched from Tabor's store. It was a right pretty spot, too, and as good a place as any to start working, so they began to dig.

Luck was riding their trail, for within a few days they struck an exceptionally rich silver lode. Thus from that \$17 grubstake and a jug of whiskey, Tabor was to realize half a million dollars in dividends.

Now the talk of the mining camps and a target for sharpsters, Tabor was soon duped into buying a mine "salted" with ore stolen from his own mine. To those in on the hoax, there was much merriment the day he sent men down into that worthless hole. But their laughter shortly gave way to groans, for Tabor struck the rich Chrysolite silver lode. A year later, he sold his interests in both mines and invested in several more promising enterprises. He continued to dig in luck, and in a few years was worth over \$9,000,000.

Then there is the instance of the miner who died during one mid-winter. His friends hired a man to dig a grave in the cemetery, and then placed the body in a snowbank nearby until the hole in the frozen ground should be ready. After several days' delay, the friends visited the gravedigger to see how he was getting along. He was getting along fine, for he had struck a rich silver lode. Within a few days that cemetery was staked out in claims.

The dead man? Oh, he was completely forgotten in his snowbank until the spring thaws brought him to mind!



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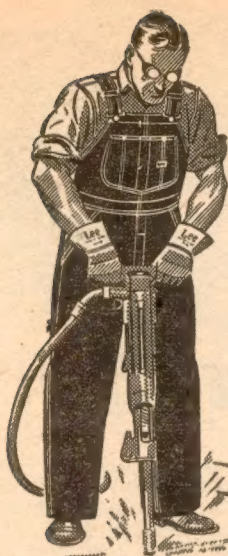
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HOW WOULD YOU HANDLE THIS?



IF YOU are range wise, you should be able to come up with answers to these problems—any one of which might face a cowboy in his daily work. Play the game, don't peek at the answer until you've made an effort to solve the problem yourself. Then turn to page 145, read the correct answer and see how close you were!

THE boss called Johnny Driscoll down to the corral and showed him the new horse, a magnificent red animal with muscular lines that spoke of power and speed.

"Ain't he a beaut?" asked the boss. "Johnny, I want him broke for my daughter. That means no rough stuff—I want him gentled so he'll be safe with her under any conditions and I don't want him havin' any grudges against the human race for beatings or anything like that."

Driscoll, a calm and reflective young man, looked the horse over.

"Maybe you're too late, Frank," he said. "I'd make a small bet somebody's taken a club to that horse before now. See the white when he rolls that eye?"

The boss shrugged impatiently. He didn't like to be contradicted. "Can't be helped," he said. "My daughter's fell in love with that horse and she wants him. You iron out his kinks and gentle him. What'd I hire the best bronc peeler in seven states for?"

Compliments were very nice, but they didn't bring a solution any closer, Johnny Driscoll decided, after his first session with Big Red. The horse had been abused by someone and the

memory of it was very strong and active in his mind. He had no love for the human race. He not only bucked, he tried to bite and to kick at every opportunity. Now the traditional cure for a biter is a sock on the nose when he reaches for you, to demonstrate that crime doesn't pay. But Johnny had specific instructions: no rough stuff. When a horse rears up and starts to fall over backwards on you, a loaded quirt between the ears is usually applied to bring him down. But no rough stuff. And simply riding him out wasn't the answer either, for that might make a chronic buckner out of him and he would be no good for anything but a rodeo. Certainly not for a lady's horse.

No, Johnny thought, staring at the horse's laid back ears, and rolling eyes. He's got to be shown that his own rough stuff doesn't pay, without my using any rough stuff myself. "What can I do to this horse to cure him without abusing him? To give him a chance to think it over and show him that I mean business?"

What would you have done in Johnny Driscoll's place? If you can't think of any answer—or if you have one and want to match it against his, turn to page 145 and see what Driscoll did to cure Big Red.

THE BOUNTY

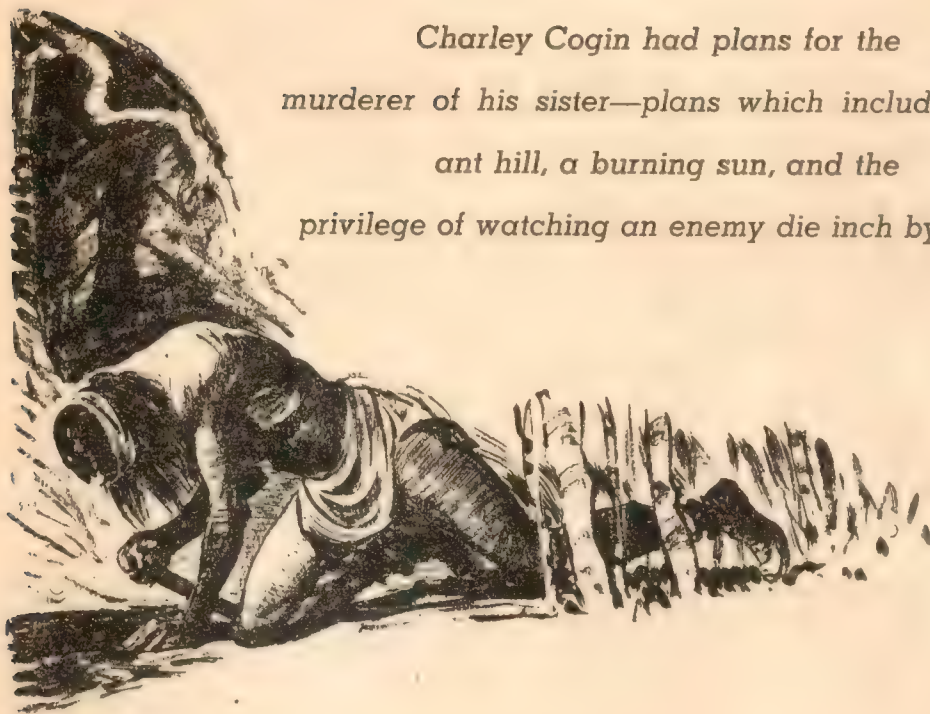


Before they were aware of his presence the .44 in his hand was flashing fire

HUNTERS

A NOVEL BY WILLIAM HOPSON

*Charley Cogin had plans for the
murderer of his sister—plans which included an
ant hill, a burning sun, and the
privilege of watching an enemy die inch by inch!*



I

THEY had told him in Holbrook not to try it; that a man was a plain damned fool to try it alone through Apache infested country to the south. Nino was out with his band, raiding and slashing at ranches, wagon trains, and not ever averse to slugging it out with the soldiers when the odds were anywhere even. He was pretty young to hold such a high position as a raider—about twenty-eight, the same age as Cogin

—but the hard riding troopers had been finding out to their chagrin that as a leader Nino had few equals.

He hated the White Eyes as few Apaches hated them, because scalp hunters had killed his mother for the Mexican gold paid for her hair, and one of the White Eyes soldiers had shot Nino's brother in a skirmish.

But to the well meant advice Charley Cogin paid no heed. His man was only

Sworn Enemies Change to Grudging Allies When

a day or two ahead of him, and the trail had been a long one. All the way from Kansas, through the Indian Nation country to Texas, and thence across New Mexico Territory to the blistering heat of the Arizona desert. He had trailed Wallace patiently, doggedly, like an Indian; he would get him in another two or three days.

He came out of the desert late that afternoon and into a green belt of cottonwood trees to the little settlement nestling among them. More than twelve years had passed since the Apache raid on the place, but it had changed little during the passing of time. Just a line of adobe buildings along one side of the "street" for a distance of three hundred feet. There were cabins and little plots of tilled land scattered around, the population not more than fifty or seventy-five.

This included the floating prospectors, bearded and cantankerous old fellows who were unafraid of the Apaches, bands of Mexican robbers, or the very devil himself; the men wanted by peace-officers; the pack train smugglers from below the border; and now and then the groups of hard-eyed hunters who made a business of raiding small groups of Apache women and children and carrying the scalps down into Sonora and Chihuahua to be exchanged for gold Mexican pesos.

These and others in a land where life was cheap and often depended upon a fleet horse or a good gun.

SUCH was the place that Cogin rode into that late afternoon, leading a pack horse; a tired looking, spare framed man not at all handsome. He wore a heavy brown mustache, as so many men of the period did. His clothes and gear were dusty, the armpits of the dark shirt wet and salt encrusted. The cartridge belt around his waist carried .44 caliber shells for the worn gun

at his right hip. The second belt over his left shoulder was much heavier because it was weighted down with .45-70 cartridges for the huge single shot Sharps rifle resting upright in the saddle boot back of his right leg.

A .44 caliber saddle gun might have been all right in cow-country, and certainly it would have been more convenient inasmuch as the cartridges were interchangeable for pistol and rifle. But Cogin knew this country better than any in the world, he knew the Apaches and their arms, and he wanted no short-range gun in case of a running fight.

He had watered his horses in the creek's summer trickle when crossing and now he rode in under the trees toward the large, circular corral not far away. It was exactly as it had been the morning of the big raid twelve years before when he'd been shot off his horse by a trooper and returned to his family in Kansas. He swung down with the stiff-legged movement of a man many hours in the saddle and stretched his frame to iron out some of the saddle kinks. From beneath a shed inside the enclosure a man came limping toward him. A small wizened man with a crooked leg. He opened the gate of cottonwood poles, said "Howdy," and waited as Cogin led his freshly watered mounts inside.

"Any chance to put up my horses for the night?" Cogin asked.

"Be glad to, mister. That's how I make my living. Can't get around much any more."

He stretched out the leg and pulled up his trousers to the knee, displaying a badly scarred shin bone that had been shattered and not properly taken care of. "Got that from an Apache twelve year ago when the red devils pulled a big raid on us here," he exclaimed. "Some fight, that. Lucky a patrol of soldiers slipped up while they had us cornered. They sure wiped out them red

Their Trails Converge on a Death Rendezvous

devils. Even caught a white kid who was with 'em. Twelve year ago, that was."

Cogin had pulled up near the shed and was unsaddling. He thought, "yes, I remember the raid and I remember shooting a leg off a man who was running toward another cabin. I remember that Nino tried to grab me up from the



CHARLEY COGIN

ground when I got shot but couldn't make it.

He said, "I hear they've been pretty busy lately."

The crippled corral man was working at the pack on the other horse. "They have been. We been sticking pretty close around here, all except Big Gert. Nothing ever fazes that woman. One of these days her and them Mexican packers of hern will wind up over a slow fire, tied head down from a cottonwood limb. That Nino is a mean devil if there ever was one. Slick as a coot. He makes fools out of them soldiers. I'll bet you, mister,

that them troopers couldn't catch that Apache if he was in ten feet distance and they all had lariats."

Cogin didn't reply as he dropped the dangling cinch and reached for the saddle to remove it. His face told nothing. It was blank, expressionless. That was what eleven years among the Apaches had done; sunk in deep. And now, after all those years, not much had seeped out. He was thinking of Nino, how they had played and fought with each other by turns, and then become bitter enemies. It made no difference that Nino had tried to grab him off the ground that morning and get him away; they had still been enemies.

HE LIFTED the saddle and carried it beneath the shed and hung it from a peg built into the adobe wall. The sweaty backed bay ambled off across the circular corral's dung covered floor to the feed trough and the pack horse soon followed. Cogin removed the heavy cartridge belt from across his shoulder and hung it from the saddle horn. He removed his hat and wiped at his face; tall, angular, booted and spurred.

"Any place I can get something to eat?" he asked the limping man.

"Last house on the other end of the street. Run by a young Mexican woman. Widder woman whose husband got killed in a fight with some scalp hunter one night in Hornbuckle's place. You don't look like a scalp hunter, mister."

"I'm not," Cogin said.

"Didn't think so. They mostly travel in bands. But if you don't mind my saying it, I think you're just plain loco to be riding alone through this desert while Nino is cutting and slashing at everything in sight. He'll have you staked out in a flash if he ever catches sight of you. But that's your business and none of mine. You must have had good reasons for doin' it, and down here we don't ask a man any questions. It

ain't healthy sometimes. We tend strictly to our own affairs and expect you to. By the way, they call me Limpy."

Cogin shook and said, "Glad to meet you." He did it perfunctorily and automatically, with no thought of becoming friendly with the man whose leg he'd almost shot off that day in the long ago. He was thinking of Nino.

I've always known he'd become a chief some day, he thought. He had what it takes for leadership. Brains and daring and a blind hatred for the White Eyes who had killed his mother and brother.

He had been that kind of a youth, and cruel even beyond Apache standards. At sixteen he had helped a bunch of bucks work on a captured soldier. Cogin could still remember how the unconscious man, tied to a post and mutilated an inch at a time for three days now, had been scalped alive; how Nino had picked up a live coal and dropped it into the bloody place where the knife had cut.

Strangely enough he had felt envy toward Nino for thinking up such a wonderful thing to do to the hated White Eyes trooper. For at sixteen, after eleven years with them, he had known no other life, had taken it all for granted, and did not consider torture to be cruel.

And now Nino was the deadliest of their slashing raiders. He was keeping the soldiers busy while the rest of the various bands hunted high in the mountain country to lay in a supply of winter food.

Cogin turned toward the corral gate and looked through the poles to the open doorways of the line of small, low adobe buildings. Here and there he saw men lounging in the shade that was now out in the street; quietly talking men seemingly without a care in the world. They might be smugglers, fugitives from the law, scalp hunters or one of a dozen other things. His mind classified them automatically while it turned from thoughts of Nino and the raid that

day in the long ago when he had tried to kill the limping man back there in the corral. He was thinking of Wallace now, wondering if the man was still here or had gone on.

Wallace either had heard that Cogin was after him or he had suspected it, for the man had fled steadily, just as doggedly as Cogin had followed him; never stopping more than two days in a place, always from a day to a week ahead. Traveling fast and light and with plenty of money from two banks he had held up before committing the terrible crime of violation and then murder of a young girl. Cogin's sister

Cogin was eyeing the street again. He turned to the man Limpy. "Been any strangers come through during the past two or three days?"

Limpy gave him a stare that was almost beady-eyed. It was chilly. "No savvy, mister."

"The rest of these horses belong to men you know?"

Again that unwavering, beady-eyed look. "I wouldn't know, friend."

COGIN unsnapped the leather strap lying tight across the top of the gun sheath to keep the weapon from jolting out while riding. He snapped it out of the way on the back side of the sheath against his leg and loosed the worn weapon in the shiny leather. He opened the corral gate, closed it behind him, and moved toward the row of adobes fifty yards distant. Doors and windows were open and in the sand two half grown pups romped and growled and bit at each other playfully. He was aware that the few loungers sitting in chairs were watching him without appearing to do so; curious yet with almost complete indifference unless they themselves were being trailed.

Cogin moved through the hard packed sand, glancing in through the open doorways at rooms, which were sparsely furnished with beds and tarps on dirt floors amid the usual litter of riding gear piled helter-skelter as only women-

less men lived. He nodded to a man here and there with curt courtesy but did not speak. There was a small saloon about midway along the line of adobes and Cogin went inside into coolness and up to a crude bar some six or seven feet in length.

He didn't want a drink because he had never learned to acquire a taste for the white man's whiskey and beer. He had learned to drink *tiswin*, the strong corn beer that was the favorite drink of the Apaches, and now during the passing of more than twelve years he drank hardly at all.

There were no customers present, just an aged Mexican sweeping the hard packed dirt floor back of the bar. He served up a drink and Cogin paid for it and then tossed it off. Not much chance of information here. He could wait until later. Right now the drink was warming his insides and taking away saddle fatigue and sharpening up his appetite. Cogin moved out into the open again, the wariness upon him as it had been in every town he had come through during the past months. Wallace was traveling fast, fleeing the law and, should he be aware of Cogin's pursuit, the man following him grimly.

There was a small store run by an old Chinese but it too was deserted. It and the saloon back there, plus the corral, appeared to be the only business establishments in the unnamed settlement. Cogin saw the smoke wisping up from a dozen cabins and speculated that if Wallace was still here he might be holed up with one of the men in the latter's adobe.

He forgot Wallace and went on toward the house of the Mexican woman, his eyes seeing everything that was within vision. That was what eleven years among the Apaches had done, schooled in such things at the expert hands of the older warriors when he was a child.

He cared nothing about women, even the young sister who was now dead and who had never quite gotten over her

awe of him. Nino hadn't cried when the scalp hunters had surprised and killed the small band of women and children, among which was his mother, and there had been no emotion in Cogin's face when he learned of his own family tragedy. He had merely picked out the two best horses on his father's big ranch not far from Abilene, Kansas, and come after the man. There had been no good-by either to his family or the men on the ranch, for he had never made friends with any man. They knew him only as a silent man who liked to be alone, who seldom spoke, who would kill at the drop of a hat. A man with fathomless blue eyes that never changed expression.

Cogin stepped into the room through the open doorway.

II

IT WAS about twelve or thirteen feet square, with a hard packed dirt floor, and contained only a table large enough to seat four or five men on each side. There were a few chairs, presumably for those who must wait their turn at the table. Four or five men were eating as Cogin entered. Through a doorway leading into the kitchen he saw two young urchins playing on the dirt floor and a buxom young Mexican woman bent over the stove, her brown breasts partly exposed. This was the widow of the dead Mexican smuggler, killed in a fight with one of the scalp hunters.

A luscious woman who, in a place where the population was preponderantly male, would not be long without another man.

He said in Spanish, *Tiene usted algun cena para me, Señora?* (Have you some supper for me, lady?)

"Si, Señor," she nodded toward the table. "*Sedente.*" (Sit down.)

She nodded again, this time toward the back door, and told him in Spanish that if he wanted to wash up there was basin and towel outside. He stepped past the two urchins, poured water into a

clay bowl on a bench, and washed the stains of travel from his face. The towel had done similar service for many other men since being washed and he smelled the sweat and dirt in it as he dried his face and rubbed at the stubble of whiskers. He would have to heat some water and shave after supper.

Birds were trilling among the cottonwoods' green foliage, a final salute and tribute to another wonderful day. They fluttered and shrieked and fought mock battles among the leaves and kept wary eyes out for the big hawks that had a habit of smashing down out of nowhere to pick up a final meal of the evening. Out by a small lot a cow, her udder heavy with milk, chewed on her cud and waited patiently for the woman to come out and turn her in to where the hungry calf bawled impatiently for its supper. Cogin returned to the front room.

One of the men was saying, "You can never tell about them red devils. That's what we thought twelve years ago when they hit us that morning. Not a sign of anything anywhere. It was just as nice and quiet as could be. I'd got up at daybreak and opened up my saloon like I always do. Limpy—his name wasn't Limpy then—he was leadin' a horse down to the creek to water it. Then they hit us like a streak of lightning. I heard Limpy yell as they shot a leg out from under him and then I covered him with rifle fire until he could crawl into his cabin and get the door barred. We drove 'em off three times during the next two hours. They'd run by a corral and shoot down a horse or anything else in sight; just anything at all to kill something, no matter what. They set fire to some of the pole corrals but didn't have any luck with the cabins on account of them being adobe. We were still going at it hot and heavy when that patrol of troopers broke in at a run and caught 'em flat footed. They killed eight of the Indians and wounded another before the red devils could spur away."

Cogin seated himself beside the speaker, a small, wiry looking, bright-eyed man of possibly fifty. The man turned to look at him and said, "Howdy, stranger. I'm Hornbuckle. Got the only bar in town, a small one a few doors up the street. First drink is always on the house."

"Thanks, I've already had it," Cogin said.

He saw the questioning looks the men sent at each other as he spoke, just as a hundred other times in the past men had looked at each other upon hearing his strange accent.

It had been difficult, at sixteen, to learn a new language from the white woman who said that she was his mother and that he had been stolen by the Apaches out in Arizona Territory when he was five. He had been unmoved at her story of how they had finally despaired of ever getting him back and had returned to Kansas. He felt no affection for her, nor for any human being on earth. He was a man alone, without fear, without emotion.

THERE was no particular anger in Cogin's heart for the savage, vicious man whose trail he had followed so patiently and doggedly for hundreds of miles. He would merely keep on it until he caught up with the man and shot him. If he could surprise the man in camp he'd bury him to the neck in an ant hill and sit there and watch him die.

It was as simple as that.

One of the men said, "I heard about that fight, Horn. Seems like they had some white man with 'em who got wounded and was captured."

Hornbuckle nodded again, and now Cogin remembered him. Hornbuckle had stood over him with the soldiers that morning when they had been about to dispatch him until a sergeant had noticed Cogin's blue eyes.

"That's right," Hornbuckle nodded. "He was shot right through a shoulder and lying there on the ground bleeding



*The raiders wheeled off
and Gert spotted the two
men who were firing*

but not letting out a peep. He just laid there and glared back at us. Wouldn't even talk with the Apache scouts working for the soldiers. And when they took him to the fort to the hospital till his folks could come after him they had to keep him chained to his bed."

"I'd like to have got a crack at him," grunted a very heavy set, seedy looking rider, busy gorging himself with food. "They wouldn't a needed any chains then, I can tell you."

Hornbuckle turned to Cogin. "Just get in?" he asked.

Cogin nodded.

"We don't ask any questions of any man who comes in here. Their business is their own. So is ours."

"If you mean how long am I staying, I'll be moving on in the morning, most likely."

"No questions intended. Just thought I'd let you know."

"I'm not a law officer, if that's what you mean. So I won't be asking many."

Nor did he intend to, except to find out if Wallace had come through re-

cently. He knew that the man had been through, the tracks of the man's horse having told him that; for Cogin could trail and read sign as few white men could, the result of his early life among the Apaches. It was a question of whether the man was still in the settlement or how long it had been since his departure.

The man sitting opposite Cogin was obviously a cheap tinhorn gambler down on his luck. His white shirt was soiled almost beyond recognition, open at the neck; no string tie supporting a diamond or two. No rings on the fingers. He had the face of a cadaver, the stringiest neck and largest Adam's Apple Cogin had ever seen. With each swallow the bulge rolled up and down and gave the appearance that the man had just swallowed whole a hard boiled egg.

"Like you, stranger, my name don't matter," he said to Cogin. "You just call me One-Card. We usually have a small game in Horn's place nights," he added suggestively.

"Sorry, I've never played cards," Cogin said curtly, and again saw the furtive, questioning looks in their eyes as they heard his strange accent.

He was one of them in that he was booted, spurred, gun belted, obviously a man who knew cattle. But that accent . . . Probably some furriner, they thought.

The heavy set puncher sat next to the gambler; obviously some kind of a loafer because his fat stomach protruded almost obscenely over the top of his belt. He was shoveling down food in great gulps as though into a bottomless pit, his gluttony sickening to see. His eyes had strayed through the doorway into the kitchen more than once, and Cogin thought he understood what was on the man's mind. Plenty of food at all times, plus a woman.

"I'm Bartlett, but they just call me Bart for short," he volunteered, wiping at his mouth with a shirt sleeve. "Do a little horse tradin' with some of the

boys who come through in a hurry and ain't too particular," he added, winking suggestively like some grinning gargoyle.

The fourth man said nothing, finishing off a final cup of coffee.

The Mexican woman came in with a platter of steaming food in her hands and smilingly placed it in front of Cogin. He fell to eating in customary silence, listening idly to the desultory conversation. From out in the street he heard the sound of loping hoofs and then they stopped just outside of the doorway. There was the sound of a boot hitting the ground, the rattle of a spur rowel. Then a woman's voice called out, "Hello, Limpy, you little sawed-off runt. How's tricks?"

III

COGIN looked up from his food as she stepped into the doorway, the man Limpy behind her; and in many ways she was a respectable specimen of womanhood. She wore a black hat, broad of brim, and with a needle pointed crown that made her appear much taller than a natural height of about five feet nine inches. Her blue man's shirt was open at the strong looking throat, revealing an expanse of browned skin above her firm looking, ample bosom. She was booted, spurred, leather skirted, and a quirt dangled from a thong around her right wrist. At her right hip, below a cartridge belt, lay a sheathed pistol.

Cogin guessed her age as about thirty-three and her weight at one hundred and fifty-five pounds. She looked as strong and capable as any man in the place.

"Well," she greeted boisterously. "Looks like the joint is jammed full."

"You can have my place, Gert," Hornbuckle said, rising to his feet. "I'm finished."

She tossed her hat into a corner, followed it with the quirt, and swung a leg over the stool, seating herself beside Cogin as Limpy followed her in.

Hornbuckle lit his pipe and leaned against the wall that separated kitchen from the "dining room." The silent fourth man got up and was replaced by the corral man Cogin had crippled in the raid that day twelve years before. Cogin ate in silence.

"Anything new about the 'Paches?" the woman asked of nobody in particular.

"Fellow came through yesterday and got a fresh horse," Bart, the big bellied eater, still stuffing himself, replied. "They hit a ranch about sixty miles north of here and then lit a shuck. Didn't do much damage. Soldiers are out after 'em but you know about how much chance they'll have catching them slippery devils. None. None a-tall. It just ain't safe to be travelin' alone around this country any more."

"Oh, I dunno," replied Hornbuckle, puffing. "Some men don't seem to think so—like the stranger here. Neither did Wallace."

Wallace! So he's been here and left, Cogin thought. I wonder how long since. Maybe I can find out later.

"How's business, Gert?" asked the gambler, One-Card.

"Oh, so-so," shrugged the woman. "My Mexican packers came in with three loads today. One thing you can say for those boys: they're as tough and fearless as they come, Apaches or no 'Paches."

"They won't be if Nino happens to run across 'em," put in Hornbuckle, and added to no one in particular: "She makes more money than all the rest of us put together." Probably for Cogin's benefit.

"Pah!" retorted the woman good-naturedly. "Smuggling *mezcal* and *tequila*? It's a dog's life. Them tightwad saloonmen in the mining camps would skin a poor woman to the teeth if I didn't lean over their bars and curse hell out of them. I just get by and that's all."

"I'll bet!" laughed Hornbuckle.

"It's the truth. Just about the time I

get some money ahead and figure I can get out of here and into something where there's real money I lose a pack train to Mexican bandits or don't get paid when some saloon goes broke. I'm in the same boat as the rest of you starving fellows. For two cents I'd give up the whole business and go back to dealing in one of the gambling halls."

"Why don't you finance me in a small place, Gert?" the seedy tinhorn suggested. "It wouldn't take much and I can skin those suckers fast and make both of us some money."

THE woman's frank eyes looked into those of the man sitting across the narrow table and a snort of contempt came from her. "You think I'd back up a cheap tinhorn like you with my hard earned money? If you can skin suckers what are you doing down here?"

"Perhaps I have no choice in the matter, Gert?"

"Jail bait for some officer, eh? You hang out down here along the creek and mooch drinks and try to win a few dollars now and then. And you want *me* to set you up in business! Listen, One-Card! Any time I open up my own joint I'll either deal at one of the games myself or supervise it. And I wouldn't even give you a job as a swamper."

"Think you might get out one of these days, Gert?" asked Hornbuckle.

"You bet I'm getting out!" the woman replied emphatically, removing her gloves and tucking them inside the circle of the cartridge belt. "You think I'm going to spend the rest of my life down here living like a man, smuggling stinking Mexican liquor to the swill houses and letting them take the big profits? I need just one good stake and then I'll be back where I belong: In a low cut dress back of a gaming table, taking the suckers for their money."

"Then," the quietly smoking Hornbuckle replied, "don't make the mistake that I did, Gert. Get out while you're young and have some drive left. That's what I was going to do years ago when

I slipped into this country to lie low for awhile until things cooled down. Figured to stay here just long enough for the law to forget and to build myself up enough of a stake to start in new some place else. Every year that's what I figured. 'Next year,' I'd say. 'Next year I'll pull out and make the plunge.' Well, next year didn't ever come and one day I woke up to the fact that I'd waited too long to pull up roots and go replant somewhere else. So here I sit in this godforsaken hole, selling raw liquor at ten cents a shot and usually not too many customers. I sold two dollars and eighty cents worth yesterday. Twenty-eight drinks from six yesterday morning until eleven last night. I've been here too long and the only thing that can take me out is a quick stake that I haven't got nor most likely will ever have."

"Well, I haven't," grunted back the woman beside Cugin. He was aware that she was attractive in a hard sort of way, and he could smell the woman smell of her, though it elicited no response in him. There had never been any room in his life, in his thoughts, for a woman. "All I need is a stake and I'll be hauling my freight out of here *my pronto* for greener pastures. Tell you what, Horn: when we make it, let's put up a big joint together, you and I. You handle the bar end and I'll handle the dance hall girls as dealers. Nothing but women dealers, trained by me." She twisted on the hard stool to look at him. "I'm dead serious, Horn. Give me a good bunch of keen girls to train and I'll trim those suckers within five minutes after they hit the place. Just all women dealers in low cut gowns, no men."

"I suppose it could be done, all right," he admitted and went on smoking thoughtfully.

She turned back and her penetrating gaze rested on Cugin's face. He was aware of it but paid her no heed.

"Which direction did you come from?" she asked bluntly.

He said, "North," and went on eat-

ing, without looking at her.

"Packing a badge?"

Bart guffawed loudly and looked at Cugin. "You know what she means by that, stranger? Her husband died sort of sudden like, that's what."

The woman looked over at him, her eyes chilly. "Don't you ever again make a remark like that, Bart, or I'll crack your head open. How my husband died or why I'm down here is none of your business. The quicker you get that through your thick skull the better off you'll be."

"I'm not packing a badge," Cugin replied.

GERT smiled. "Good. Then you're welcome here. Hey!" she shouted in through the doorway to the Mexican woman. "Bring me some grub. I'm going to fill up and then beat the pants off any man who wants to play poker. And that includes you, One-Card, if you've got any money—which you undoubtedly have not."

"Maybe the stranger here, who doesn't play cards, will stake me," suggested the gambler.

"Not interested," Cugin answered curtly and went on with his meal.

"Has he told you his name, Horn?" asked the woman over her shoulder.

"We haven't asked, Gert," Hornbuckle replied.

Cugin rose from the table, stepped to the kitchen doorway, asked the price of the meal, and paid in small silver coins. The Mexican woman bobbed her dark head and smiled and said, "*Gracias, Señor. Muchas gracias.*" Cugin rolled a cigarette and looked at Hornbuckle.

"Mind if I asked you a couple of questions in private?"

The wiry little saloonman looked him over, and into his eyes came the same kind of wary chill that had been present in the eyes of the man Limpy, now waiting for his meal.

"Nothing private around here, mister," he answered with just a touch of

brittleness in his voice. "We're all friends here, sort of all one of a kind. What's on your mind?"

"Been any strangers in here the last couple or three days? One man in particular, playing it solo."

"You just came in," was the pointed reply.

"About thirty-seven years old. Knife scar over his left cheek bone. Brown, drooping mustache with sharp points. Square built. Packs two guns, sometimes."

Every eye in the little room was on him now, the woman's very hard and penetrating as though she was trying to probe back of his lean features to see what lay in his mind. She said, "What did he do? Maybe he wasn't here."

"I trailed him here," Cugin said. "He was here, within the past three days, I'm pretty certain."

"You talk plenty funny," she told him. "I've seen a lot of furriners in the places I used to work in. Got to where I could tell what country they came from by their accent. But that one of yours has me baffled. Never heard it before. What did he do?" she repeated.

"Wallace? He's killed nineteen men and held up a few banks—among other things."

"Hm," she said thoughtfully, mostly to herself. "I knew he was running from something. He had to be to keep on hitting out through this desert filled with 'Paches. He was here, sure. Camped at my place down the creek a ways for two days while he rested up

his horses. Played poker in Horn's with us nights. And you're after him and you ain't packin' a badge."

"No badge."

She twisted around to look at Hornbuckle, a slight frown creasing her rather attractive face. No doubt about it, she had at one time been a strikingly beautiful woman. Cugin thought vaguely and disinterestedly that, had she not worked in dancehalls at the gaming tables, she would have made some hard working rancher an ideal wife.

She said, "If he's not packing a badge, Horn, what other reason would he have for trailing Wallace?"

Hornbuckle looked at her speculatively and didn't reply for a moment. He finally removed the wet stem of the corncob pipe from his mouth.

"Maybe for personal reasons."

SHE shook her blonde head. The hair was piled high in long braids like those of a silken rope. "Possibly, but I don't think so. He said Wallace had robbed banks, and I know that's true for I saw some of the big wads of money he always kept near a gun at night. That means a reward for him. A bounty. Our friend with the strange accent is a bounty hunter, Horn. What about it, mister?"

"Just tell me when he came in, when he left, and which direction," Cugin said impatiently.

"Oh, like that, eh?" she snapped at him.

[Turn page]

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"Never mind, lady. It really don't matter a lot. I can pick up his tracks in the morning."

"Of course you can," she half jeered at him. "You said you trailed him this far, didn't you? You come in here with a face like a canyon boulder and a strange kind of voice I never heard before. You ain't no ordinary cowpuncher or horse-thief. You don't pack a badge and you ain't the kind to give a damn about anybody or anything except maybe money. So I've got you pegged. *You're a bounty hunter, out for scalp money.* Well, you won't find out anything else in here so don't ask any more questions."

He was unaware that something about him, his aloofness and indifference, had aroused strange stirrings within her; that she lived her life alone and manless in the settlement because it was her code, a throwback to her dancehall days when a girl, even a dealer, had to have her guard up all the time. She had never revealed what had actually caused the death of her late husband, leaving the men who knew her to guess. And now this stranger had come along, indifferent to the fact that she was an attractive woman in a womanless place, and the thought stung her just a bit.

Cogin stepped to the doorway and tossed away the butt of the cigarette. "Believe whatever you wish," he said curtly to her and, for that matter, to the others. "Just as long as I know that he was here recently. I'll get him."

"Like hell you will!" came her jeering voice, stinging at him as he had stung her by his cold indifference.

He went on out into the evening shade again, striding back toward the corral to unpack his bedroll and get at his razor. In the room there was silence for a few moments and then the woman got to her feet, all thought of food temporarily forgotten.

"I've got him pegged, all right, Horn," she insisted. "I'm positive. That icy-faced gent is a money hunter."

"Maybe not," he said dubiously.

"What happens when a man sticks up a bank?" she demanded. "Does the banker get on his horse and go after him when the sheriff fails? Not on your life. He puts out a reward and lets the other fellow do the riding and dirty work. This is strictly a reward job. I'd bet on it."

"How come you're so positive, Gert?" asked the saloonman.

"Listen, Horn," she said earnestly. "I held out on you boys. I told you Wallace had quite some money but I didn't say how much. Well, it was *plenty!* In two canvas bags, all paper gold backs. I held out saying anything because I saw a chance for a quick stake to get out of here and get back to civilization in the kind of work I'm best fitted to do. Wallace didn't tell me where he got the money and I didn't ask. I wasn't interested just as long as he *had* it. I tried to get him to pull out of here with me and go some place and open up a gambling hall. He wanted to do it, too, except that he had to get across that Mexican border for a few months and lay low until things cooled down. That much he told me. He promised he'd come back in a few months and we'd make it. I was all resigned to a period of waiting. And now this fellow who talks so strange comes in on his trail. And I can tell you right now, Horn, that with this icy-faced gent after him Wallace is *not coming back!* So where does that leave Big Gert again? Right behind the deuce."

"Tough luck," commented Hornbuckle.

HOPE had returned to Gert's heart. Her eyes flashed.

"Tough luck?" she cried out. "The one chance I've had in four years to get back on top, and now it's blown to pieces by this man who just left. Horn, I want that money, plus what he's probably got on his head in rewards. I'm going after it."

"How? Where?"

"Wallace was heading for Chihuahua

City. That much he told me when he left. I asked him why he hadn't gone straight to El Paso and taken the stage down but he said he couldn't risk it. There was a man on his trail he had to shake off first. That's why he cut a circle way over in this country."

"And you think you could overtake him?"

"Easy. It's not too far to the border now and he'll feel safe once he gets across. He only left day before yesterday as you know. My packers met him on the way up. There's been no wind to cover his horses' tracks and trailing will be easy. We can wait until that bird with the strange voice gets to sleep and pull out of here tonight on some good horses. We'll be miles ahead by tomorrow. And if that bounty hunter tries to overhaul us a few good rifle slugs will change his mind. What do you say, Horn—you and me, the stake we've been looking for?"

Three stools scraped on the hard packed dirt floor almost simultaneously. The man Limpy, the heavy set gluttony Bart, the seedy looking gambler called One-Card. His monstrosity of an Adam's Apple rolled up and then down his thin throat as he looked at the two other men at the table.

He said to the woman, "Why you and Horn, Gert? By what right just you two? I thought it kind of funny you let him cotton up to you when you're always so standoffish toward all men. I should have remembered that you once was a dancehall clipper. You can count us in on the deal."

"You can count yourselves right out on the deal too."

One-Card shook his head. "We're either in or we go straight to that stranger right now and spill the whole works. You and Horn ain't the only ones who'd like to get out of this hole and make a fresh start. And, besides, if there is trouble from him, you may need some help and lots of it. That gent is dangerous."

"That just about says it all, Gert,"

the man Bart put in. "Better take a smaller cut and play it safer. You and Horn wouldn't be no match for a man like him. That boy is as tough as they come, and you ought to have sense enough to know it and not let your greed cause you to do somethin' foolish."

"I'm crippled up from an Apache bullet but I can still ride and shoot," Limpy put in quietly. "Count us in, Gert, or we spill the whole works. With the money from them banks, plus the rewards this feller is after, there'll be enough for a stake for all of us."

She looked from one face to another, back to Hornbuckle, still smoking thoughtfully, then without a word sat down and began to eat the food the Mexican woman placed before her.

IV

DARKNESS came down softly that evening, moving in in cool silence except for the birds that now chattered not loudly but with occasional sleepy chirps. A few lights pin-pointed the coolness that had come first among the trees and then begun spreading up the gentle slopes of the desert. All day long it had been burning hot out there while the rattlesnakes coiled themselves in the shade of cacti and the field mice remained under ground and the big night owls remained asleep in their homes in hollow cottonwood trunks.

From the open doorway of Hornbuckle's small saloon with its short bar of rough planking came the sound of much laughter, sometimes a little high pitched and off key, and the click of poker chips. There was a penny ante game going while four men and a woman waited for the night to advance.

Fifty yards from the back of the corral Cugin had spread out his tarp bedroll beneath a big cottonwood and lain down to rest a bit; to smoke and to think. Now he rose, took his shaving outfit, and went toward the home of the Mexican woman. He passed the open door of Hornbuckle's and saw the game

in progress, a few idle loungers, and passed on.

She was coming back from the corral, carrying a pail of milk and followed by the two fatherless urchins, tagged by a mewling kitten and a nondescript pup, all milk-hungry.

"Water for the shaving?" she asked. "Of course, Señor. One moment and I will have it for you."

She brought the water from the kitchen stove and gave him a clean towel. She stood idly in the doorway and watched as he scraped away a three days growth of pig bristle from his cheeks and chin.

"You have come a long ways, I think, señor," she said.

"Yes, a very long ways."

"And you have far to go?"

"A bit further, I think. To Mexico."

"My home was in Mexico, señor. I came here with my husband. He is buried out there behind the corral."

He was sloshing water over his cleanly shaven face, washing away the suds. He turned, towel in hand. "Then why do you not return?"

She shrugged as only a Mexican woman can shrug. "I have the two children and no money, señor."

There it was again, he thought. Another lost one in this unnamed settlement, not a resident but a prisoner in the desert, without the one key that could free her: money. They were all the same. All except Wallace. It was ironical that Wallace, the murderer, had, through the use of his guns and a display of daring and recklessness, brought the key with him. A key consisting of two canvas bags filled with gold back notes taken at gun point and leaving two dead cashiers and one wounded constable behind.

Cogin finished and left her, returning along the street where the laughter still came from Hornbuckle's place and the few loungers sat with chairs tipped back against the walls of their dirty, gear infested adobe abodes. He returned to his bedroll, removed his boots, and

lay there on his back, looking up at the branches of the tree where the birds chirped sleepily; looking at the sky beyond.

He saw the twinkling of the stars and remembered the many legends the Apaches had taught him of the spirits up there. Once one of them cut a long flaming path in a downward curve and then went out. One moment a bright constellation, the next a cooling dark mass speeding on through space to the end of time, unto eternity.

There was a half framed thought in his mind not to go back after he had caught and killed Wallace. He felt strangely like that falling star up there; motion but without emotion, going on aimlessly because certain laws, not man made, seemed to make it impossible for the star to turn around and go back.

There was nothing for him back in Kansas on the big ranch of his father. No friendship, no affection, no ties that impregnated in him a desire to return. He had lived too long among the Apaches to adjust himself fully to the life of his family in Kansas. He had remained too long among the whites to return to the Apaches. . . .

* * * * *

"Hey, what in the hell have we got here?" the voice suddenly demanded and he opened his eyes there near the corral and looked up into the faces of the men standing around him.

Hornbuckle was there, much younger now, and carried a rifle in one hand. With him were some White Eyes soldiers; three of them. Thirty or forty others were walking around among the sprawled bodies scattered over an area of one hundred yards; for the raiders had been so absorbed in their attack that the one from behind had come as a complete surprise.

"He's only a kid but he's a mean looking little devil," Hornbuckle said.

"Go get the lieutenant," a sergeant ordered a corporal.

"Lieutenant hell! Give me one shot from this pistol through his damned head and we won't need no Lieutenant. We ain't packing in any wounded 'Paches."

"I said go get the lieutenant! Take a look at them eyes. They're blue and he's lighter skinned than the others. He's white! Go get Lieutenant Egglestrom!"

The blood was still running a bit from the gaping wound in his shoulder, high up, proving the shocking power of a Sharps .45-70 rifle. The big bullet had somersaulted him out of the saddle and Nino had done his best which wasn't enough. He had flashed by on his pony and swooped down and grabbed for one of Cogin's hands, but his hold had slipped and Nino had kept right on at a full run while the soldiers cursed and tried to reload their rifles for more shots.

He had lain there and eyed them with a tight mouth and coldly burning eyes and waited for them to kill him, for he

couldn't understand a word of their garbled White Eyes tongue.

This White Eyes officer who came was slim and ramrod straight and still carried a saber in one hand. He had been dispatching a couple of the wounded warriors unable to crawl away.

The officer shouted something and waved and one of the Apache scouts who had helped to trail and surprise the raiders came running. He was a middle-aged warrior that Cogin knew well, Janaca, and he spoke the garbled tongue of these White Eyes. The officer talked and pointed down and the scout nodded and grinned. He looked at Cogin, on his back on the ground, naked from the waist up.

"He says that you have the light skin and the eyes of one of them, that you are not an Apache."

"He speaks with a forked tongue like all White Eyes. I am an Apache."

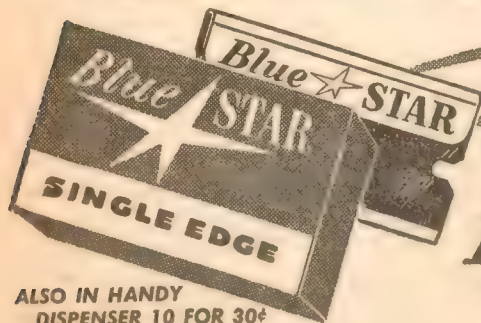
More talk, more garbled words, and

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then the middle-aged warrior who now worked for the soldiers grinned again and spoke to him once more.

"He speaks with a straight tongue, *Poco*. I know this thing to be true because eleven grasses ago I was on the raid when you were taken from the ranch. I helped your father carry you off, and now you will not return to him from this raid. The White Eyes officer says that you will be taken to their camp. When you are well you will be sent far away to the people we took you from."

"I am not a White Eyes. I'm an Apache!"

"You are a White Eyes. . . ."

The hospital room at the fort was of adobe, plastered smooth inside and whitewashed, and he found himself in a bed of the kind the White Eyes slept in. It was a foolish kind of contraption and not as comfortable as his bed of deer-skins spread on the ground inside the *jacal* of his father. He lay there covered with bandages around the shoulders and neck and watched the nurse with burning eyes.

HER nose was too thin, not broad and dark like the beautiful Apache girls. Her eyes were the hated blue of his own, the color of which always had shamed him, and for that reason alone he would have killed her had the opportunity presented itself. She was one of those useless White Eyes women whose back and shoulders were not strong enough to carry a baby lashed to it and a deerskin sack full of berries on top of her head. He simply couldn't understand why her young officer husband was so proud of her and why the other officers so envied the man because of his beautiful young wife.

He turned his young back on her as she smiled a good-night and blew out the lamp, and an hour later one of the sentries found him crawling along the ground of the compound, dragging himself with his one good arm. After that they manacled him by one wrist to the

bed and the Apache interpreter told him that in a few weeks his White Eyes mother and father would arrive to take him away. . . .

* * * * *

The whitewashed walls of the room faded out and darkness came again and Cogin shifted his body on the tarp bed-roll. Presently he dropped off to sleep.

He slept the sleep of the tired and the healthy, though sometime during the night he thought vaguely that he heard in his sleep the sound horses make while walking slowly through soft sand. He did not awaken sufficiently to investigate but slept through until daybreak. He lay there for a few moments in the gray dawn, his face and body drinking in the coolness of early morning before the sun would soon drive it away, yawning and stretching the lethargy from his now rested body. Finally he sat up, rolled a cigarette, pulled on his boots, and went toward the creek to wash his face in the cool waters.

Presently he returned and picked up the tarp bedroll and carried it over to the shed in the corral. The man Limpy wasn't around and Cogin guessed that the poker game had not broken up until late and that the man was still asleep. That was what happened to a man when he settled down too long in one place. As Hornbuckle had so judiciously pointed out the evening before, you got into a rut of routine too comfortable to climb out of, the bloom of energy and ambition faded, and you gradually went to seed.

Cogin watered his own horses, found feed and set them to eating, got curry comb and brush from his pack. The sweaty backs of his two mounts had long since dried from rolls in powdered horse dung, a few good shakes, and exposure to the cool night air. He worked away at their backs until they were smooth and sleek. He wanted no galled horses to slow him up on the trail that must end only in the death of Wallace.

These were the pick of the big ranch up in Kansas and he took good care of them.

The settlement was dead, devoid of all life and movement, as he went down to the house of the Mexican woman to have his breakfast.

V

A DESERT is supposed to be a dry, barren land of brush and cacti and rocks and eroded gullies and arroyos, cut and slashed by the flash floods during the rainy seasons; a land of long, burning stretches of dry waste country devoid of all human life. But on this particular day had a crow flapped up out of the cottonwoods by the little settlement and flown a straight line almost due south toward the Mexican border forty miles away it would have found human life.

The crow would have seen a lone rider leading a pack horse and following almost leisurely the tracks made by the horses of four men and one determined woman. It would have seen those five, miles further on, first spread out and then finally converge on the tracks made by the two horses of a man named Wallace. The crow would have seen a tired, dusty troop of cavalymen coming out of the wastes after another futile patrol in search of the elusive Nino, currently the most hard raiding of the various bands of those fierce-visaged warriors.

Had the crow flown on far enough south and into Mexico, gone deep toward the Sierra Madre—the Mother Mountain—it would have seen the murderer Bas Wallace holed up comfortably at a small spring, plenty of food in his pack, though fear in his heart. He had met Cogin on their ranch up in Kansas, knew the man's Apache background, knew what to expect. As a gun-fighter with nineteen men to his credit he had no fear of the grim rider he knew was on his trail. He would have turned at bay and killed him; stopped in any

town, waited, and shot him down. But Cogin wouldn't come into a town in the open like a "white man" would, and that was why Wallace the murderer still fled.

And the crow would have seen Victorio Lopez, a self-styled young bandit leader, and his men camped deep in the wilderness of the wild Sierra Madre.

But Cogin saw none of these things as he followed the tracks southward on that warm, clear morning. The tracks told him that the five money mad riders had traveled fast during the night, driving two pack horses ahead of them. There was urgency in the tracks, the way the toe marks dug in as they had galloped and trotted by turn.

Cogin himself was in no hurry. He knew he could overhaul them. He himself knew a little about night riding.

He let his two horses set a good pace, knowing from years down here with the Apaches just how fast to travel. He rode until just before noon and finally pulled up in the shade of a giant saguaro that grew on the lip of a washed out arroyo. The cactus and the bank afforded shade for the horses and for himself. He poured water from his wet canvas sacks into nose bags, let them drink and then fed them lightly from some grain carried by the pack horse. There wasn't much water left when he finished, but this worried him little; for he knew every waterhole in all this dry, desolate land as well as his father up in Kansas knew his grazing ranges.

For three hours he rested the horses and himself while the sun swung overhead and then pushed over toward the west. The heat had not lessened when he changed his saddle to the pack horse, switched the pack to the horse he had ridden all morning, and again took up the trail. He traveled steadily for most of the afternoon, stopping at a waterhole hidden in a rocky gully to replenish his supply of the precious liquid. Half an hour later when he topped a ridge he saw soldiers.

There were about thirty of them, he

judged, led by a young lieutenant and accompanied by two Apache scouts. One of them Cogin recognized at a glance; Tanaca much older now. The middle-aged one who had been present the morning of the raid on the settlement when Cogin's life as an Apache had ended and his new life as a White Eyes began.

THE scouts were apparently guiding the troop to the waterhole and Cogin pulled up and waited. They rode up, tired and dusty, the blue of their uniforms almost white from the alkaline powdery dust. Cogin raised a hand in greeting and the officer replied in kind, riding closer.

"Good afternoon," greeted the officer. He was young, not more than twenty-three, probably not long out of West Point. "I'm Lieutenant Franklin, of the Eighth Cavalry."

"No sign of Nino, I suppose," Cogin ventured. His eyes had gone to the face of the older of the scouts. He thought, the old devil doesn't look a day older than twelve years ago. And I'll bet my last dollar that he could find Nino if he wanted to badly enough. I guess he's got into a rut too. A twenty-dollar-a-month rut.

Franklin was looking at Cogin with keen interest tinged with just a bit of resentment. He was young, he was ambitious, and the fact that they had been out for ten days without a sign of Nino irked him. Cogin thought, seeing what lay in the man's eyes, You'll feel differently in a few more years, Lieutenant, when you're a slow moving captain.

"No sign at all," Franklin said curtly. "May I ask where you're headed?"

"I'm trailing five damned fools, including a woman," Cogin said drily. "How far are they ahead?"

"About thirty miles. We met them this morning. I warned them that they should return with us, but they appeared determined to continue. Haven't they sense enough to know that they

may end up staked out on the ground? This country is alive with Apaches."

Cogin let that one slide by with a half smile. He wanted to say, You didn't find any, Lieutenant. Maybe because that grinning old devil there didn't want you to.

He said, "They're pretty hard-case customers, officer. They can take care of themselves—maybe."

"Maybe?" came the half angry reply. "The military rides the seat out of their pants trying to run down these raiding devils and for what? To have people go out like that and get themselves killed. And who gets blamed by the people of the Territory? The soldiers, of course."

The older of the scouts had edged his horse forward and was watching Cogin's face closely. Cogin thought, He recognizes me all right. He'd never forget a face even after twelve years.

"Well," said Lieutenant Franklin briskly, "we'd better get forward men. I suppose it will do no good to urge you to return with us to the safety of civilization."

"None at all, Lieutenant."

"You wouldn't have a chance alone out here, man! Like so many of you civilians of the territory who have never fought the Apaches you simply fail to realize the danger."

The scout had urged his horse forward a bit closer. Now he grinned that slit mouthed grin again and spoke. "Long time you go away. No come back. You White Eyes now, Poco."

He was speaking Apache and a look of astonishment broke over the officer's face as the gutturals came rapidly from Cogin's lips. "Where is Nino?"

"Don't know. Maybe here, maybe long far away."

"You know, Tacana. But he is young and you are old and you can not catch him."

"Catch him some day. You wait."

"I beg your pardon, sir," broke in the astonished officer. "Am I to understand that you speak Apache?"

"Quite fluently, Lieutenant, partly be-

cause this old devil here was one of my teachers," and Cogin grinned one of his rare saturnine grins.

HE LEFT them, his mind automatically dismissing them as soon as they were behind. He turned to the problem ahead, his one fear that the five up there thirty miles away would come upon Wallace in camp and kill him without warning. That was a job for Cogin to do and not for the money the man carried. He had simply set out to get the man and his methodical mind brooked no thought of anybody else doing the job for him.

He rode until dark and then made camp at another spring, which was almost dry. He ate and rested the horses for four hours and then went on

a small army could harm him.

Cogin rode on all that second day, changing horses at regular intervals, the trail still plain ahead. He camped at a small *ranchito* that night to rest his tired horses and get them some green feed. The desert had begun to give way to small foothills and spotted among them were a hundred green patches that told of cultivated fields. By noon that day, when he bought supplies in a tiny village store, the five travelers were only four hours ahead of him. Wallace was a little more than a day, having come through the morning before.

The trail was getting close and so was the rifle bullet that screamed past Cogin's head just before sundown.

VI

HORNBUCKLE was the one who had spotted Cogin early that day while the party rested their horses briefly on top of a rocky ridge. The saloonman was the only one of the party who carried field-glasses. He turned in the saddle, lowered the glasses, and in silence returned them to a leather case fastened to the saddle horn.

"Well?" demanded the woman Gert.

"Of course it's him," Hornbuckle grunted. "You should have known it wouldn't be anybody else. He isn't the kind of a man who'd give up just because five of us got the jump on his quarry."

His temper was on edge from the heat, from fatigue, from the alkaline rasp in his throat. The others were much in the same mood. There had been frequent outbursts of temper; men snapping at one another because their nerves were getting raw from the strain and the uncertainty. They were tired of each other's comments, of expressed hopes, of occasional grumbling at the heat and flies and the whole burning country itself. And of course that feeling of distrust of each other was beginning to creep up now that the wanted man was not more than a day or so



RUINED ROMANCE

By S. OMAR BARKER



*A stingy young rancher named Hank
Always drove with gas low in his tank.*

This saved him no money,

But it lost him his honey,

When she had to get home via shank!

through the night, riding until some time shortly before daybreak. He was far across the Mexican border by now and following the trail deep into Sonora. It was angling eastward toward the state of Chihuahua, strengthening Cogin's belief that Wallace had too much money to hole up in a small place. Chihuahua City was a mecca for every type of American, both fugitive and otherwise; and when a man had gold to pay to certain officials nothing short of

ahead. This much they had found out by inquiries where Wallace had stopped to water his horses and now and then purchase food and supplies in small villages.

"We've got to stop him," Hornbuckle said, finally.

"Of course we've got to stop him," snapped Limpy. "Let's keep going until we find a good place for an ambush and I'll drop him cold with a rifle. I might be crippled but I can still shoot."

He used his good leg to gig his horse over to where the two pack horses carrying their supplies were nibbling at a small bush. They moved into motion and Bartlett, the horse-trader, spurred up to the fore again to take up his job as tracker. His fat had begun to tell on him now and the sweat ran down his face in streams and soaked his shirt around the collar. The gambler One-Card rode near Big Gert and stared straight ahead, doubtless day dreaming of the big place he would own and the money he would make after Wallace had been overhauled. Hornbuckle used the glasses more frequently now.

He didn't know whether Cugin had spotted them or not and doubted it seriously because the man far back there in the wastes was but a tiny dot through the glasses.

Limpy rode off to one side, herding the two pack horses, the foot to his shot up leg dangling free of the stirrup. The leg had begun to pain him a bit, yet he was the one among the party who had made no complaints. He rode with his small, dark head sunk forward a bit, following the horses automatically but not seeing them. He was unaware of the heat now, for he was thinking back. . . .

* * * * *

He was remembering how he stood in the darkness near the church where she had slipped out to see him a final time, her young face upturned to his.

Sure, I didn't want to do it, honey.

But he had no right to keep me from seeing you. He was only your step-father anyhow and as mean an old cuss as ever lived. Now look here, Della. I'm skedad-dling out of here fast tonight. Where? Out west some place. I'm going to lay low for a couple of years in one of them mining camps and make us a big stake. . .

Sure I can do it, honey. You oughta know I'd do anything for you. But you got to wait a couple of years for me, honey. By then things will be all blown over and I can come back and get you—Oh, I know you will. That's what I'm counting on. I'll be back here in a year or two and get you and we'll go some place and start together like we been planning before that old fool busted things up and I shot his head off. You just wait for me, honey. I'll be back. . . .

* * * * *

He hadn't gone back. He had made one of the copper mining camps all right and gone to work. But when a man is twenty-one with a sixteen-year-old girl waiting for him, impatience becomes the master of conscience sometimes. He had started gambling in the vain hope that he could amass a "stake" in a hurry and return for Della; and when a cheap tinhorn like that one riding beside Gert cleaned him of his savings a youthful temper and frustration overcame common-sense and caution. He had returned to his shack, stuck his pistol in a pocket, gone back and demanded his money. The tinhorn paid with his life for his stubbornness and the man now known as Limpy paid for his freedom by fleeing into the desert and coming to the settlement.

He had reasoned: I'd better build myself a cabin and lay low here for a few months. I can make out somehow until things cool off. Hate to wait another few months before I can go back to Della but she'll wait. She said she would and I know she will.

He had built his cabin and settled

down to watching the faces of every stranger who came, but the law somehow couldn't, or didn't, bother.

Then a sucker had come along, and Limpy had said:

"Sure, I'll sell you my cabin for twenty dollars, stranger. I'm pulling out next week. Going back to get the prettiest girl that ever lived. Apaches? Naw, them red devils got more sense than to attack this place. No danger here."

NOT until the morning two days later when he dragged himself into his cabin with a bullet shattered leg, knowing that he was crippled for life. Twelve years ago now and he hadn't gone back because of that twisted shin bone that forced him to walk on the toes because the leg was shorter than the other. He had spent twelve bitter, memory filled years cursing the Apache who had done it—quite unaware that that same "Apache" was now but a few miles behind, coming on their trail; that he was, unknowingly, going to ambush the very man who had filled Limpy's life with bitterness and frustration.

"Hell, I'll go back!" he said suddenly, unaware that he spoke the words aloud, his head snapping up with a jerk.

He spoke so loud that Big Gert riding not far away, looked over curiously. "What are you gabbling about, Limpy? The heat got you?"

He ignored the thrust and trotted after the pack horses. It was all clear now. A crippled leg didn't really make any difference when a man had money and a good business such as a livery. And there was always just a *chance* that Della had never married; that she was back there as he had left her, now about twenty-nine years old.

The afternoon passed swiftly for him now as the party drove deeper into the desert. They could see the mountains far, far in the distance, a purple haze covering the slopes. Somewhere between here and there was Wallace with all that money plus a probable big

bounty on his head, and Limpy wondered how much. Too bad he couldn't extract that particular bit of information from the man back there in the distance. But it was too late now.

That stony-faced man—whoever he might be—was taking his chances, as they were taking theirs, and must suffer the consequences for his actions.

Up ahead the ground sloped sharply upward for more than one hundred yards to lip a ridge and then disappear beyond. Limpy could see the tracks of Wallace's two horses even at that distance and when the party pulled up on top to blow their horses for a few moments the crippled man turned to Hornbuckle. Hornbuckle had the field glasses to his eyes again, as he had been doing at regular intervals since first discovering their pursuer.

"How far, Horn?" he asked.

"About three miles, I reckon. He don't seem to be in any particular hurry. Guess he must be pretty sure of himself."

Big Gert twisted her well built body in the saddle, her bosom showing sweat through the man's shirt. Of them all she appeared to be the least fatigued.

"He's that kind," she said. "I've seen them before in the honky-tonks. I've a hunch he'll try to go around us tonight."

"He's not going anywhere past this ridge," Limpy grunted. "This is where he stops—for keeps. You all go on ahead just like natural. I'll wait here until he starts coming up and then slam him one good and center and bring in his horses. I'll pick up your trail and find where you're camped."

"Maybe I'd better stay with you," suggested One-Card. "Two's better than one."

Limpy almost sneered at him. "Since when did you ever learn to hit the side of a shed with a rifle? You'll get nervous finger and throw one at him before he even gets in range. You trot along with the rest of them. I'll take care of him."

One-Card just as uglily sneered back. "And take whatever money he has, eh?"

Nice boy!"

"Cut it out, you men," ordered Hornbuckle, who had more or less assumed leadership, aided by Big Gert. "Let's have no more of that."

Limpie rode over and extended a hand. "Better leave them glasses with me, Horn," he suggested.

HE TOOK them, raised them to his eyes, and adjusted them into focus. He studied the plain trail they were leaving, the surrounding terrain—and then slowly lowered them and looked at the others.

"That's funny," he said in a quiet voice, a queer note in it. "You seen anything besides that feller back there today, Horn? No? Well, I'd a sworn I did just now. Seems like something moved over there about three-quarters of a mile away back of that ridge south and west of here."

*Bart let go with one of his coarse bel-lows. "He's got buck fever, that's what. Plain buck fever. He gits ready to stop that tough hombre back there and then starts seeing things. Haw-haw-haw!"

"Have it your way," Limpie replied. He studied the terrain again, saw nothing this time, and lowered the glasses. "Better get going. I'll be along about sundown."

They left him there on the ridge and rode down the declivity on the other side. Limpie giggered his horse down about thirty yards and tied it securely to a greasewood bush. He took his rifle from the saddle booth and tucked a handful of cartridges into a pocket from his saddle-bags. The climb back to the top sent fresh pain through his shortened, twisted leg but to this he paid little heed now. He was going to kill a man. His third. The first in over twelve years.

There was another of the ubiquitous greasewoods growing right on the lip of the ridge and behind this Limpie took cover, stretching himself out flat on his belly and piling up the extra cartridges within easy reach beside him. This was a mere precautionary move only for the

magazine of his repeater held four in the tube and one in the firing chamber, and the gun was fairly effective up to two hundred yards, its trajectory pretty flat to that distance.

Limpie thought, I guess I oughta put his horse down first to make sure he don't get away. But if he barricades himself back of the carcass with that big single shot Sharps I saw on his saddle I'm liable to find myself in the position of the gent who caught the bear by the tail and couldn't let go. I couldn't get him but I couldn't run either. If I did I'd likely get one right through the back at a distance of four hundred yards.

He adjusted the field glasses again and watched the distant horizon, but Cogins had disappeared somewhere in the undulating swell of the desert. Limpie lay there and waited, using the glasses, that sense of uneasiness beginning to come over him again. He kept twisting around to watch the other ridges, some sixth sense telling him that there were others out there somewhere besides Cogin and himself.

Hell, I'm getting jumpy, he thought. Guess it's only kind of natural after twelve years. I was younger then and hot-blooded. Didn't bother me a bit when I killed Della's step-father and that tinhorn who rooked me at blackjack. And—shucks, this won't be any different. I got too much at stake to be worried. I wonder if she really *did* wait all these years. Well, I'll find out. . . .

He found the answer just forty-five minutes later, the answer that solved all his problems. He never knew just how they got so close upon him before he heard the first sound and turned his eyes from the fore. But what he saw chilled the blood in his veins and turned it to ice and all the old terror of twelve years ago came back.

There were about twenty of them, the foremost not more than thirty feet away; lean, dark skinned fellows in white muslin breech clouts and white deerskin leggins and moccasins. They

were naked to the waist but with lateral streaks of white across their cheeks and noses just below the burning black eyes. Some wore bands of bright cloth around their heads. A few were armed with bows and arrows, the others guns; smooth bores and stolen fifty caliber Sharps carbines. Their leader was tall for an Apache, about twenty-eight, and instinct told Limpy who he was, why the patrol far to the north had not found him.

Nino. The Apache whose mother had been scalped by a white man.

Limpy stood there under their guns, the ice still in his veins, no doubt in his mind as to what would happen now. He knew. And he had no intention of letting them work on him.

With remarkable speed for a man of his type he jerked his pistol free and shot himself through the side of the head.

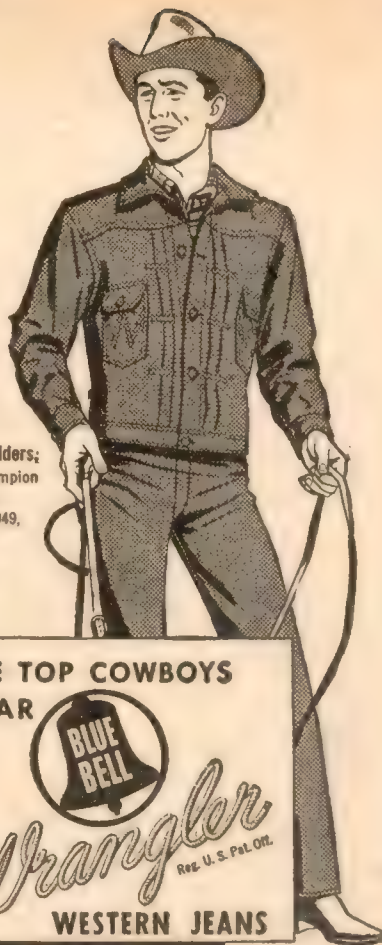
VII

NINO let out a grunt of contempt and his moccasins and leggins made audible rustling sounds as he moved on up and stood looking down at the sprawled figure lying on its side. Nino rolled it over on its back and bent and picked up the rifle and pistol. The rest of the party had moved in close, one holding the reins of Limpy's horse.

"He would have died bad," the Apache said to the others, meaning that the White Eyes would have shrieked and yelled in pain instead of dying good like a strong man.

They went to work methodically, stripping the body of all clothing and valuables and then mutilating it with knives and lances. The saddle was taken from the dead man's horse and cut to pieces, all bits of metal such as cinch rings and buckles being saved, along with the bridle bit. Nino sat on the ridge with the glasses in his dark hands. They were the first pair he had ever seen, though he knew from past experi-

[Turn page]



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ence plus what some of the scouts had told him that the soldiers had some kind of magic eyes with which they could see as far or further than an Apache.

And now the glasses excited him. He squatted on his haunches, sweeping the hills and arroyos and ridges, small guttural sounds of wonder coming from him as far away objects came up close. He would look at a ridge, then jerk his eyes away and look again as it fell back into the distance, then bring it up close again and make more of those excited sounds.

The rest of his men had clustered around, some eager to look through the magic eyes but many clearly impatient to get after the others the party had spotted earlier that day. But Nino was in no hurry now. His last raid of a few days back, far to the north, had sent soldiers out from all forts as far north as Prescott, the regimental headquarters. The deserts and mountains were swarming with White Eyes, which was why he had streaked south and fled across the border into the land of the Me-hi-canos. He would give the White Eyes soldiers time to tire of the futile hunt and return to their forts to await another raid of Nino's choosing.

Down here he could rest and raid at leisure, for he held little fear of the Me-hi-cano soldiers. They fought only in the desert and would not venture into the mountains unless their numbers were as many as the blades of grass. Meanwhile Nino's new quarry of foolish White Eyes was heading in exactly the direction and directly toward the place he wished them to go. There was plenty of time.

They would kill the lone White Eyes who appeared to be trailing the others and let the others get into the mountains, where they could be taken alive. While the impatient younger warriors waited Nino sat there on his haunches atop the ridge, the glasses glued to his dark eyes, and watched the back trail.

Sometime later he saw the man come into sight about a quarter of a mile

distant. He was riding in a leisurely way as though he had not a care in the world, like so many others of the stupid White Eyes. The rider came on closer, following the tracks of his quarry, and suddenly the expression on Nino's black face underwent a swift change. He jerked the glasses down, raised them again, and that hissing intake of breath the Apaches uttered when excited now escaped him.

"Poco!" he exclaimed. "Poco!"

He turned his head and looked at an older warrior, the very brother of Tarana the wrinkled scout Cogin had met that morning. The old man's black eyes were curious.

"It is Poco who comes," Nino said excitedly. "Poco the White Eyes who went back to his people twelve grasses ago when we raided the settlement among the cottonwood trees by the creek."

POCO! He had been dirty-faced and crying and shaking in terror when his new "father" brought him in from the raid on the Cogin ranch; and because he was so small they had named him Poco because the Apaches liked Spanish names. The sound was more musical to the Apache tongue and it gave them a sense of superiority to take the names of their hated enemies.

Nino was thinking: I will show you how to play the Apache game of ball, White Eyes, and if you cry I shall beat you. You are an Apache now and Apaches do not cry. . . .

He had shown the White Eyes and helped to teach him the Apache tongue. They had gone on the summer hunting trips and ran races and splashed in the cold streams and chased rabbits. They had become young novice warriors together until the time Nino saw Keneta go through the puberty rites and become a woman of fourteen grasses. The following summer, when she was fifteen grasses, Nino had led his three ponies over to the *jacal* of her parents one night and tied them there and crept

away. All during the following day Keneta let them remain without watering them, as was customary.

But on the second day Nino had been in the brush at dawn, his eager eyes on the jacal. If she untied the horses and watered them there would soon be much dancing at a wedding feast. But if she refused. . . .

He waited. The sun rose higher and still he waited. Perhaps she was sick he told himself. Perhaps she had not *seen* the horses now tied there for more than thirty-six hours. His heart sank lower as the sun continued to climb, and at dusk, filled with shame and humiliation, he crept up and led the thirsty animals to water himself. His suit had been rejected.

Keneta preferred Poco. And Nino hated Poco for that.

"I'll beat her for that," Nino grunted to himself, the glasses now glued hard to his eyes while he studied Poco's features again. "I'll go back and tell her how I tortured Poco and then I'll beat her again."

He shifted on his haunches, dark face expressionless, no sign of his thoughts visible. He thought, the White Eyes bullet did not cripple him. His arm swings good. If he had lifted the good arm that morning when we raided and he was shot, I could have dragged him up on my horse and he would still be an Apache. On the other hand, perhaps it was much better this way. Had Poco not been returned to his people, Keneta now would be the mother of Poco's children instead of Nino's, as she was.

It was better this way. He would capture Poco, torture him, and then go back and boast to Keneta while he beat her.

Nino put down the glasses. He picked up the repeating rifle that had belonged to Limpy, whose mutilated remains lay a short distance away, and examined it with satisfaction. He lined the sights on a distant rock and they were straight and true to his eye. He turned to the others.

"When Poco comes near I'll shoot his horse dead and we'll take him alive," he said.

He lay down on his naked belly in the exact spot where Limpy had waited and the warriors faded from the top of the ridge. Nothing showed up there as Cogin came on. He was wary from long experience but held little fear of trouble with the others up ahead. Like the Apaches, there was always plenty of time.

He dropped his horses down a bank to the sandy foot of the ridge and started up. One of the horses sneezed and blew dust from its nose. The pack pony walked along behind. It was late and cooler now and quiet.

It was then that the shot came.

Cogin almost felt the bullet scream past his face as he heard the scream of the pack horse behind him. Nino, shooting down from above, and unused to the new rifle, had made the common mistake of so many who shoot down at a slant. He had fired high and killed the pack horse.

COGIN dropped the lead rope in a flash and wheeled, driving in the spurs hard. The bay leaped forward and began a rocketing run down the sandy floor of the arroyo while more shots came. Shrill yells came from above and in a matter of moments a group of about twenty or so Apaches spurred over the crest in a compact bunch. Cogin's left hand extracted a shell from his belt almost with the movement of his right as he jerked the huge single shot Sharps from its saddle boot. He wheeled in the saddle and drove a big slug of lead squarely into the group, killing a warrior.

He jerked the breech block open in a flash and inserted the second shell and slammed home another that killed a second warrior, went on through and wounded a third. That scattered them in all directions and made them too poor targets now upon which to waste precious ammunition. Some wheeled and

fled back over the ridge, others down toward where he had been fired upon. Nino and a few more spurred forward, firing wildly and trying to bring his horse down.

He had gained enough time in the initial dash as the band broke and scattered, and the light was good enough yet for accurate shooting. Coolly he swung down and dropped to one knee. The big rifle went up and crashed back against his shoulder and at distance of almost three hundred yards he shot another one dead.

"Pull off, pull off!" screeched Nino and followed it with a high pitched yell that all understood. They fled like shadows and Cogin drove on, this time at an easy lope. An ordinary white man would have become panicked and run down an already tired horse. But Cogin was no ordinary man. He knew the Apaches.

They would try to get him in the darkness.

He trotted the horse, twisted in and out of gullies; playing for time that would bring on full darkness. When he had broken away he had wheeled to the left, heading in a northeast direction, making them believe he was running a circle to get around them. As a matter of fact, he did just the opposite.

He doubled back in the direction whence he had come and about nine that night returned to where the dead pack horse lay on its side. He didn't bother about removing the pack or salvaging anything from it. He could live on the land. The important thing was that he could hear their coyote signals far in the distance and the way forward was now open. He led his horse up to the top of the ridge where the ambush had taken place, saw the mangled thing that lay there a vague lump in the darkness, and the long years he'd spent among these now out to capture him told a plain story.

"So they left Limpy behind to down me and Nino caught Limpy instead," he said. "Afraid to share the 'reward'

money for Wallace. And now I suppose I've got to save the damned fools' lives. Plus my own."

VIII

STOICALLY Cogin swung into leather again, left that mutilated thing on the ground to be finished off by the coyotes and buzzards, and rode slowly down the declivity. The calls were still coming from far away in the night, and those calls were asking if there was any trace of the White Eyes who had killed three of their number, wounded another, and escaped.

Cogin half smiled to himself in the darkness. Some kind of a twisted fate, that seemed to be enmeshing a lot of persons in a grim tangle of life and death, had given him the knowledge and cunning to escape that first attack, to interpret their signals in the night, to know that if they tried to trail him in the darkness it would be slow progress.

He had no illusions as to what lay ahead, and you had to give Wallace credit for being either very frightened, which he most likely was not, or a man of exceptional courage, which he was. He was heading straight for the Sierra Madre range, alone, into some of the wildest country on earth. A land of thousand foot gorges and peaks, of puma and jaguar, of Mexican bandit robbers, of wild, fierce Indians, some of them other Apaches like those back there in the night.

He thought, Wallace must not have known I was on his trail and should have turned at bay.

He worked the horse on at a slow walk, partly for the sake of less sound and mostly because it was cool and he wanted to conserve the animal's energy. The heat of traveling all day long across a burning desert takes much out of a horse, and nobody realized it more than Cogin. Thus he let the animal take its own time while he sat with the big Sharps across his lap and watched the

night and listened for sound. There was the usual call of the real coyotes and now and then the spine chilling roar of the big lobos that could hamstring a cow with one slash of their huge teeth and cut her throat with a second. An owl swooped by, sailing low above the greasewood, eyes on the ground for the long tailed field mice that came out at night to feed.

Cogin covered a mile and then another, pulling up now and then to listen. Once his horse slobbered and he clamped a hand over its muzzle. He crossed an arroyo and climbed up a cut bank and began an ascent up a long, gentle slope. The ground would continue to rise from now on and would end, more than forty miles away, at the escarpment that was the foot of the great Sierra Madre range.

From somewhere up ahead, a mile further on, he caught a faint glow. He rode up onto a higher point, the instinct of the long years past spelling caution

until he saw the pin-point of fire and knew he had found their camp.

He let the bay pick its way among the greasewood and cacti until at last he reached the small arroyo and one hundred yards above where the four of them were camped. The horse slid down the bank and stones; dirt rattled. A voice in the distance called out, "That you, Limpy?"

He paid the call no heed but let the horse amble along the gravelly floor. He came into the light of the small fire and found four of them, three men and a woman, standing with ready rifles.

"Well, I'll be damned!" ejaculated Hornbuckle, lowering his gun. "The bounty hunter himself. I spotted you quite a ways back. Had an idea you'd try to circle around us tonight and beat us to Wallace."

"Is that why you left Limpy behind?" Cogin asked sardonically as he swung down.

[Turn page]



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The woman Gert had not lowered her rifle at all. Even in the dim light of the small fire Cogin could see her eyes back of the barrel's length; hard and determined but with just a touch of uneasiness in them.

"Drop that gun and then take off your belt, mister," she ordered. "So you got Limpy, eh? Drop that gun."

COGIN grunted and slid the Sharps back into its saddle boot. He ignored her and loosed the cinch on his saddle, shaking it to let air circulate between the blanket and the animal's sweaty back. He thought now that he should have taken time to cut open his pack from the dead carcass of the other mount and take out the grain sack. There was desert ahead for another day's ride and there wouldn't be much forage nor the opportunity to let his tired mount hunt for it.

"Put down that gun and stop acting a fool," he ordered sharply.

He strode to the fire, aware of their hostility, their uncertainty. There were frying pans around where they had cooked flapjacks and bacon and made coffee from tins. He kicked the utensils aside and began using the side of his boot to scrape sand over the coals.

"Just a minute," broke in Bart beligerently. "What do you think *you're* doing? Where's Limpy?"

"He's dead," Cogin said and went on covering the fire. The last of the coals disappeared and the camp was in darkness, in a desolate desert that sloped gradually upward toward the foot of the great Sierra Madres still so many miles away; four men and one woman who now must fight for survival.

Cogin sat down on a rock and reached for sack and papers, aware of the dim forms standing around him, the guns still lined toward where he sat.

"You'd better sit down and take it easy," he advised.

"We'll stand right here until we find out a few things, mister," the woman said. "And if you've got any idea that

you get Limpy's share just because you killed him, you better think again."

"And you'd better forget Wallace for the moment, lady," he answered quietly, spilling tobacco into the brown trough between his fingers.

Hornbuckle said just as quietly, "And you'd better do some explaining. I spotted you early today through my glasses, miles back. We didn't want you going around us tonight so Limpy stayed behind to see you didn't. I don't know yet how you got by him. He was in perfect position for an ambush, and Limpy was a pretty good shot. You must have circled him and come in from behind."

"I didn't circle him. But some friends of mine did."

"Who?" demanded Bart, still beligerent.

Cogin said quietly, "Some Apaches led by an old friend of mine. Fellow named Nino."

"What!" cried out One-Card. "Apaches? Up here?"

"Down there," corrected Cogin quietly. "He wasn't a very pretty sight by the time they got through with him. Nino is good at that."

"So Limpy was right after all," Hornbuckle said thoughtfully. "He was nervous as a cat. Said he saw something, or thought he did. We figured it was buck fever at lining you up over a gun-sight."

"They waited for me," Cogin went on in a matter-of-fact tone of voice. "About twenty of them. But the shot missed and killed my pack horse. We had quite a little fracas before I got away in the darkness and back-tracked to where they'd worked on him. As I said, Nino is good at that kind of thing."

"You think he's coming on after us?" asked the gambler, the fear in his voice expressing what lay in the hearts of all of them.

Cogin's grunt at such a simple question came through the darkness. He knew the workings of Nino's mind, his plans, just as clearly as though they

had squatted down and talked as of old instead of slugging it out briefly in a running fight in which the raider had come off second best.

"He'll be after us," Cogin replied to the question, licking the cigarette paper. The match flared briefly, illuminated his emotionless face for a brief moment over cupped hands, died again as Cogin blew it out and let it drop between his booted feet. "The territory is hot for him now after the last series of raids. The country is covered by patrols of the kind you ran into. Hard riding and willing but fighting them the West Point way, which is just what the Apaches want. Some of the scouts are doing their best but others like the old fellow you saw with the patrol—his name is Tacana—are just drawing easy pay and not trying too hard. So Nino has come south into Mexico, where the Mexican troops are less persistent, to lie low for awhile, raid down here, and hole up in the Sierra Madre. He's heading this way now to hole up. You fools are in front of him and can't turn back, and he's taking his time. He'll get you at his leisure—when he can take you *alive*."

HIS cigarette tip glowed brightly and then faded in the silence that followed. He heard the quick intake of breath of the fat man Bart and knew that sudden terror had struck home.

"You seem to know a lot about it," the woman finally said.

Cogin said, "I expect I do."

That was all that was said for a few moments. Cogin sat there and smoked the cigarette down to his fingers while he listened to them talk and discuss what to do next. Bart wanted to cut south again, try to circle around and find sanctuary in one of the villages or on a big hacienda in that green belt back there miles and miles away.

"They always have scouts out on each side, just out of gunshot range," Cogin informed him. "The moment you made a break for it the main band behind would wheel and attack."

"If there's not too many, we could hole up and hold them off," suggested the gambler, the darkness covering the movement of that big lump in the front of his throat.

"And have them sit patiently day after day, emptying bags of water in plain sight while your tongue swells with thirst. Dancing around and yelling. Pulling down their breech clouts and patting themselves at you, one of their favorite pastimes. They'd love it. They don't like for a man to die quick and easy."

"So we're to be herded like sheep ahead of them into the mountains and slaughtered at their leisure?" demanded Hornbuckle.

"I reckon, mister," came Cogin's reply, "that that's about the size of it. I personally don't care what happens to any of you. Nobody asked you to come. You got yourself into this mess and the only reason I'm staying with you for the moment is because, in spite of my contempt and hatred for all of you, I'd like to see you have at least a part chance of getting away. I don't mind seeing all of you killed quick. None of you are fit to live. I just wouldn't want you to spend three days in dying."

"Then what do you think we'd better do?" the woman asked, all antagonism gone from her now. In the brief time Cogin had known her it was the first indication that beneath her exterior she was just a woman, after all; a very attractive woman, in fact.

"You'd better pack up and get out of here right away because they can trail by darkness. No trouble at all to follow the tracks of these horses in the sand. It'll take them three or four hours to find this camp but they'll find it; and some of those young bucks might be a little impatient to get to work. They might not wait."

He rose and dropped the butt of the cigarette and from force of habit ground it into the sand with his boot heel. "You better go pack up," Cogin told the silent group. "We've got a long ride ahead

tonight and the horses are tired."

The horses were tired. You could feel it beneath you as they worked up out of the arroyo, hit the greasewood studded wastes of the incline again, and went forward at a walk, carrying weight that was much heavier now than it had been when they were rested and early morning fresh.

Cogin led the way, the others following. Nobody spoke; saddle leather creaked. The pack horses were being led by the man Bart. They traveled forward, climbing steadily, until the stars told Cogin that it was almost three o'clock in the morning.

He had always carried one water sack on his saddle, precaution against such events as had now come to pass. Now he unsaddled the tired animal, gave it most of the water from the sack, letting it drink out of his upturned hat, and took it to a place where bunch grass grew sparsely. The others watched and did the same. Then they slept the uneasy sleep of the tired, the hunted. The cornered.

At sundown the following day they came to halt, after a long, final climb, where a spring gurgled down through some rocks; where the grass was green and, above them, were steep timbered slopes.

On the far reaches of the plain below nothing moved in the desert. Nothing. Nothing that was visible to the human eye.

They're waiting, Cogin thought. They are in no hurry.

IX

ONE of the many phenomena of the desert is the remarkable suddenness in which a rainstorm can come up. The sky is listless, flat looking, and glaringly bright in the dry heat. Half an hour later a change is felt in the air, and then the first clouds begin to form. Cogin saw them as the party made camp.

He was unsaddling his horse, near where Hornbuckle was doing the same.

He said, "You'd better have your people make camp over there in the clearing away from the trees."

Hornbuckle paused and the instinct of fear caused him to subconsciously throw his gaze back down the long slope to where there still was no moving object in sight.

"You think they'll try it tonight, eh?"

Cogin shrugged. "I was thinking of lightning near these trees. It's dangerous. But the rain will blot out tracks and that might give us some temporary help."

"Rain?"

"In about two hours—and lots of it. Better make your camp accordingly."

He hoped they all had sense enough to construct some small brush jacals and then cover them with their waterproof bedroll tarps. As for himself, this thing of spending a night in a storm without shelter was no new thing. The Apaches never bothered with such cumbersome things as big bedrolls, and for that reason he did not feel too keenly the loss of his own pack. He was pretty certain that Wallace was not too far ahead and he wanted to go after him before the rain started, trailing him as far as possible before the man's trail was blotted out.

Cogin picketed his horse at the end of the lariat and carried his saddle with its empty water sack and saddle-bags toward the lee side of a big rock. The others were busy doing the same. The woman Gert came over and flung down her bedroll and sat down on it with a bit of a tired sigh. She removed first her hat and gloves and then the weighty cartridge belt.

"Got a match on you?" she asked, reaching for tobacco sack and papers. "I'm so tired I could drop and a cigarette will taste good. I could even go a small drink right now if there was one handy."

"There is," Hornbuckle replied. "I slipped in an extra pint for just such an occasion. Might be the last time we'll

ever have a chance to take one, too, come to think of it," he added with a wry attempt at humor that fell completely flat.

The gambler One-Card was already picking up a good sized rock and placing it next to another preparatory to starting the evening cook fire. Cogin handed the woman the match and told them all to get their cooking done before dark, use a small fire that made little or no smoke, and then to take turns at night guard with the horses bunched up close.

He had already sat down and was removing his boots. Gert watched him over the smoke of her brown paper cigarette, watched the play on his lean face as he tugged off first one and then the other.

"You know, Charley, you could be almost human if you wanted to," she remarked with an attempt at real friendliness. He had told them only that his name was Charley and let it go at that. Nor did Hornbuckle as yet even dimly ever suspect that this man they all hated yet now looked forward to for leadership was the same "Apache" Hornbuckle had stood over that morning of the raid on the settlement.

Cogin didn't answer the woman. He had opened up his saddle-bags and removed a pair of moccasins. These he slipped on his feet and laced the strings around his ankles. Bart came over, puffing a little, some dry brush in his arms. He tossed it down beside the two rocks, straightened, and wiped the sweat from his face.

"Doggone but it's hot," he grunted. "This mountain country is a lot different than down there in the desert. I was always told that the mountains are cool, but up here I can hardly draw muh breath."

"You'll be cool enough in a very short time," Cogin said. "And soaking wet."

THE others had begun eyeing him suspiciously now as he took some jerky from a saddle-bag and stuffed it into his pockets. The woman Gert rose

to her feet as he removed the huge Sharps rifle from the saddle boot.

"Where do you think you're going?" she demanded roughly.

"After Wallace. His tracks show that he can't be too far ahead. I want to get on them before the rain washes them out."

"So . . ." The woman again, her lips thin and cold where but moments before they had been smiling as she watched him. "Still want all of that money for yourself, plus all the bounty, too, eh?" she jeered. "Just going on up alone and knock him off and take everything. Then you lay out there hidden in the brush and wait for the Apaches to finish us uff. Or were you going to take Wallace's horses and beat it on alone?"

He looked at everyone of them, the tense positions of their bodies, the greed and suspicion and fear. The contempt for them lay plain in his eyes.

"There's no reward money on Wal-

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lace's head," he informed them quietly. "And the other money will be returned to the banks, the rightful owners. You invited yourselves on this little party and now there'll be no money of any kind for any of you. The one thing you'd better concentrate on now is just getting back alive. I know Nino and how his mind works. If his impatient young bucks don't talk him into letting them work on you tonight they'll probably wait until we get still higher into the wild country. I told you he has plenty of time. He'll pick the strongest one of you—probably you, Hornbuckle—and work on you for about two to three days until you finally go under. You two men will follow second and third. They'll save the woman for the last and probably swing her head down by her heels and over a slow fire."

"My God!" whispered Bart, his flabby, sweating face the color of cold ashes. "Them devils do that to us? We got to get out of here. We got to!" his voice rising to a higher pitch and almost ending in a wild cry.

"That's why I'm going after Wallace," Cogin said curtly. "To bring him back here, not to kill him. We'll need every extra gun we can get to pull out of this mess."

He shifted the rifle, automatically making sure of the ugly snouted length of brass in the firing chamber, and Hornbuckle, the calmest of the four, spoke again. He was eyeing Cogin quietly, speaking quietly.

"Then just why *are* you trailing him?"

Cogin gave him back the level eyed look. "He stopped over at our ranch in Kansas for two or three days and went head over heels for a sister of mine twice as young as he is. She's dead now and Wallace will probably pay for it staked out on the ground or tied to a post. I have no intention of letting him ride on while we protect him from the rear. You keep a double guard of two all night, lying flat on the ground feet to feet. Keep the horses bunched

up close and watch them, listen for nervous slobbers. They can smell an Apache and they don't like it any more than an Indian's pony likes a white man's pony at first. I'll get back with Wallace in tow as soon as possible. If I don't make it in time, I'll bury what's left of you."

"You got us into this, damn you!" the woman almost hissed at him. "It was all your fault! You come in there trailing Wallace and not telling anybody anything. And because of you, we're hemmed in by a bunch of bloodthirsty Apaches that you seem to know one hell of a lot about."

NO CHANGE of expression came to Cogin's face. He seemed unperturbed.

"I do," he replied calmly. "I was raised with Nino for eleven years. We're enemies, and my presence here will please him very much. That's why I know what we're up against—"

"Wait a minute!" cried out Hornbuckle. "That raid on the settlement years ago! That Cogin kid—he—you—no, it can't be! *It just can't be!*"

"It's true, I reckon," was the reply. "I'm Cogin. I'm the man who shot Limpy's leg from under him that morning twelve years ago. I'm kind of glad he got his before he had a chance to find out who I am—or was. Well, now you know. I'll do whatever I can and use whatever knowledge I haven't forgotten to get you out of this mess. But don't depend upon it. There's about sixteen of them in the band but they can get more with smoke signals if they get us cornered and need help."

He shifted the heavy rifle to his other arm, knowing that he might be seeing them alive for the last time. The thought gave him neither satisfaction nor sorrow, merely a feeling of contempt for the greed they had shown for an opportunity to collect blood-money. Cogin didn't hate them any more than he hated Wallace. He neither loved nor hated any person alive. And that included Nino. They were merely ene-

mies of long standing.

A slight breeze swept through the surrounding trees as though some invisible giant was fanning with his hand the green foliage. It waved gently back and forth, back and forth. Down on the desert more than twenty dust devils, or small whirlwinds, were funneling their way across the wastes. The air seemed to grow more humid. Hornbuckle cleared his throat and spoke.

"Just in case you don't get back tonight what do we do?"

"Keep climbing as near due east as possible and cover as much ground as you can. If you go far enough you'll find thousand foot gorges that will take you three days alone to find a way to the bottom. You'll come up against mountains you can't climb even on foot. Do the best you can, keep a sharp lookout all the time, and double guards at night. Don't kill any game with a gun, because there's more up here than Apaches and just as bad. Mexican bandit gangs; renegade American outlaws who raid mines and mule trains; bands of Mexican army deserters—plus a few things like grizzlies, jaguars, rattlesnakes and scorpions. If the rain blots out your tracks, I'll cut them again, never fear about that."

He said it in a matter-of-fact way as though they had been discussing the price of sheep or cattle. Then he turned and was moving away, a solitary figure in moccasins; alone, indifferent, still aloof.

He disappeared up the slope just as the spine chilling roar of a lobo wolf came floating down on the breeze.

X

WIND from the sky began to increase in velocity, whipping at the brush and berry patches and the green branches of the trees; coming down from above as though to meet and join with the storm forming on the wastes of the desert miles below. Cogin saw antelope bounding away and deer by the

dozens. A few broke and ran followed by long legged fawns; others stood and watched him curiously. An eight-point buck moved forward belligerently, followed him a few yards, and then turned back.

For that Cogin was grateful to the buck. He wanted no shot to warn Wallace of his presence or others who might be lurking within sound of a gun. But he could tell from the animals' actions that there was a heavy storm in the offing, and he moved on as fast as he could climb steadily. He saw far among the distant mountain ranges a small black cloud that was pouring a dark mass of rain on some isolated spot, and he knew that down among the canyons and gorges the wind was howling. The *zopilotes*, the great black-necked Mexican buzzards, so plentiful an hour ago, had now disappeared completely; gone back to their caves and their young to sit out the storm in darkness, croaking and groaning like tortured souls of the dead.

Cogin covered the first three miles before the rain drops began to fall, slanting down from above. He cursed innerly because the tracks of Wallace's two horses were still plain and easy to follow; they were fresh enough that the man couldn't be much further ahead. Probably holed up in shelter to ride out the storm.

A rustle in a nearby berry patch caught his eyes and ears at the same time and a big she-bear raised up on her hind legs to peer at him. Then the thing he most feared happened; with a rumbling growl she crashed through and lunged straight at him. He thought, Damn the luck! I was afraid of something like this.

He let her get within twenty feet of him, coming at full charge with the red mouth and flaming eyes wide open. The .45-70 caliber bullet caught her squarely in the mouth and he leaped aside as she rolled past him and two big cubs let out bleating cries and fled away together.

The heavy roar of the big single shot went rolling away into the distance. It rolled far away down the slopes whence he had come and struck faintly but unmistakably the ears of three men and a woman who jumped to their feet and looked at each other with a mute question in their eyes.

It brought Wallace out of his tarp shelter, where he had holed up comfortably, to stare with that same question in his eyes.

It struck faintly at the ears of the bandit Victoria Lopez and eight of his tough followers camped two miles away.

Cogin stood there levering out the smoking shell and shoving in another, his lips tight and grim. He knew the four back in camp must have heard the shot and might become panicky. He wondered if Nino was far back in the desert or if, watching the camp of the four, the Apaches had heard it too.

But there was nothing to do but go on now. If he went back to the camp Wallace might become frightened and escape. If he went on . . .

Cogin went on. The rain was wetting his shirt and shoulders now but he paid it no heed, just as Nino and his warriors, without shelter, would pay it no heed.

The ground was becoming a bit slippery in the bare spots now and a few tiny rivulets began to run. He doubted if this particular downpour would last too long. It was another of those so typical of the country.

He lost the tracks just as darkness began to crowd down onto dusk, and there was nothing to do but find shelter and sit out the night. If the rain ceased by morning Wallace would move on and Cogin could cut a two or three mile circle and pick up the tracks of the two horses again.

BUT by then it would probably be too late to get back to aid the others. Nino, if Cogin gaged him right, would strike about tomorrow night, and it would be doubtful if there would be

that much time.

Cogin covered another mile in the rain which was now beginning to lessen. It was still light enough to see some distance for in summer the sun does not set up there until about eight o'clock. There was a cluster of rocks ahead; big white fellows standing up eight feet high. Cogin made for them, to get on the lee side and hunker down and eat jerky. He half slipped and slid in the mud down a three foot bank and almost lost his balance.

He saw the brush shelter, the tarp over it, the two picketed horses. He heard Wallace's voice from behind.

"Drop the gun, Charley, and then unbuckle your belt with your left hand."

Cogin lifted his blank eyes and saw Wallace. The fugitive he had trailed more than fifteen hundred miles sat on his haunches on a rock some four feet above, elbows resting on his knees, a big pistol in each hand. From a corner of his mustache a cigarette trailed smoke up past one eye.

There was nothing for Cogin to do but obey the command. He knew this man too well, his past record of coming off victor in gun duels that had taken the lives of nineteen men both good and bad, the man's cold courage. He placed the rifle against a rock, leaning it barrel up, and unbuckled his belt and let the heavy object drop to the ground. Wallace slid down the rock as Cogin stepped away from reach of his weapons.

"Well, I'm glad it's over, Charley," Wallace said quietly. "You'll never know the hell I've suffered all these weeks, the nights when the every sound of a wood rat was your boots in the darkness—you with a gun in your hand like I've got one now."

"Why didn't you turn on me?" Cogin asked carelessly. "I'm no gun-fighter and you are."

Wallace was backing a few feet away, one gun still covering Cogin, his eyes never leaving Cogin's face. He knelt beside his shelter, reaching back of him to fumble at his pack. "If I'd thought

it was just that, Charley, I wouldn't have hesitated. I'd have stopped off in some town and got you—even if I'd have had to do it in the back."

"Then why didn't you?" was the harsh answer.

"Because," Wallace said quite frankly and honestly, his eyes glinting, "I was afraid of you. I still am. You wasn't the kind to ride into a town in the open when you figured I was there. Not a man who was raised among the 'Paches. *That's* what I was afraid of, Charley. The 'Pache in you."

Cogin thought bitterly, Yes, I know. I know all about it. The thought suddenly filled him with smouldering anger at his father. (Howdy, stranger. Light and rest a spell. I'm Lee Cogin. Wallace? Never heard of you but glad to meet you. This is my son Charley, foreman of my outfit. Maybe you heard of him, eh? Used to live with the Apaches. Yessir, they got him when he was five and kept him *eleven years!* Couldn't speak a word of English when we got him back, but he can sure trail a centipede across lava rock.

(Damned old fool, why don't he shut up? Why does he always have to keep boasting and blowing about something a man wants to forget?)

(Pap, for God's sake, why do you have to keep bringing it up every time a stranger comes to this ranch? I know I'm a freak among these plains people up here but why do you have to keep making it worse? I never saw this Wallace visitor before and I don't expect he gives a damn where I was raised, since he don't expect ever to see me again. So, for God's sake, lay off, will you?)

(Why, shucks, son, it ain't nothin' to be ashamed off, even if you are different from the rest of us. I just thought it might sort of explain that funny accent you talk with and keep 'em from staring at you . . .)

"Ah, here they are," Wallace said in satisfaction and brought out two objects from the saddle-bags. A pair of

handcuffs and a badge now partly rusted. Wallace looked at them and laughed. "Do you know what, Charley? I've carried these for so many years I've forgotten; out of habit I suppose. Just never got around to throwing them away after I gave up being a peace-officer. And now they come in handy against the one man in this world I've been afraid of."

HE OPENED the cuffs and tossed them to Cogin. "Fasten them to your wrists in front, Charley. That way you can roll smokes and eat. There's no hurry about the job we both know I've got to do. And for some strange reason I'd kind of like to explain to you what actually happened up there at the ranch. Maybe I ain't as bad a man as some people think. By the way, what would you have done if you'd caught me flatfooted here in camp?"

Cogin was busy putting the rusty cuffs on his own wrists. He nodded down the slope to where, about forty feet away, a large mound rose up out of the ground near the rotted trunk of a big tree probably felled by lightning many years before.

He said, "I'd have buried you up to your neck in one of those and waited for the sun to come out in the morning."

Wallace stared at him, and when he spoke his voice was almost a whisper. "You would do—*that?* To a white man? Even *you?*"

"An Apache like me wouldn't have done what you did in Kansas," Cogin said without emotion. "It was against tribal laws and religion to molest an unmarried girl against her will."

But he knew that what he had said was untrue. That might have happened had it not been for the chain of circumstances that had brought the lives of others into his own plans, enmeshed them, and twisted them into a pattern that would probably explode into deadly violence. And Wallace's guns would have come in handy.

Wallace still had him covered and

now he removed Cogin's weapons to the opposite side of the camp, secured a lariat and piggin string, and came back. He tied one end around Wallace's chest just below the armpits, knotting the rope from behind, and then fabricated with the piggin string a make-shift harness that held the prisoner's arms below his shoulders. A stunted tree grew between two of the rocks above and to its lone limb the fugitive fastened the other end of the picket rope.

When he was finished he stepped back and eyed his work with satisfaction. Cogin could move his cuffed hands up and down to a limited extent, could reach the fire but no further. Only then did Wallace sheathe his gun and step back.

"All right, Charley," he said. "That'll take care of you while I cook us some swell supper. Fresh venison steaks."

Cogin had backed up against the perpendicular face of one of the rocks, sheltering himself from the rain now pelting them less harshly. "You must have been pretty confident—using a gun that I might have heard," he pointed out.

Wallace laughed. "Give me credit for having some sense, Charley. It was a young deer that a big catamount had just filled up on. I chased him away and cut off a few choice chunks. And speaking of shots, was that yours I heard?"

Cogin nodded and told him about the she bear, and all the terrible tenseness that had been bottled up inside Wallace during the past weeks now flooded out in his laugh of sheer relief.

"That was really a break for me. I've been ducking and dodging for so long the shot came as a relief, though it meant bad news: Either you, one of the bandit gangs I spotted yesterday, or Apaches. There's plenty of all of them but I had to take a chance alone through here, plus hoping that some of them would stumble onto you and take you off my hands."

"They're still going to," Cogin said.

"Nino and some of his best warriors are down below looking after some friends of mine," sardonically, "and one of yours. The woman called Big Gert."

XI

GUSTS of rain were still pelting down, the wind whipping through the trees on the ridge above. Dark clouds scuttled and roiled as though romping in the backyard of the sky, gleefully; playing tag above. The two horses on picket ropes stood with hips acock, the traditional posture of horses at rest; bearing the wetness in patience. Cogin braced himself against the rock. Wallace was crawling beneath his tarp shelter to get at a dry shirt.

"Night owls and bald eagles!" he grinned, turning and sitting down on dry earth, stretching his legs out before him. "You don't say? And just why should that bunch of unholy characters be down there?"

Again Cogin went into detail. Something about it seemed to arouse amusement in the man, Wallace. He went off into laughter, the mustache that drooped completely over his mouth and covering it from sight waving like wheat stalks before a wind.

"You don't say? Big Gert herself, eh? She didn't fool me in the least, playing up to me like she did. That gal is the practical type. But she wouldn't play ball in my league even after I baited her with promises to come back some day and set her up in a gambling hall."

"Didn't you intend to?" asked Cogin carelessly; anything to make idle conversation. He was completely disinterested.

Wallace laughed again, fumbling for the clean, dry shirt. "I never intended coming back, Charley. Back in the states and territories I'm supposed to be just another badman. But I've known for quite some time that my string was just about played out up there. It started in Texas, right after the Civil

War, when I was an officer with two Negro deputies. I needed a stake to set up in Mexico and I got one. No, Charley, I didn't intend to go back to Big Gert. It's Mexico for me."

"I guess she must have figured that one out when she came after you," Cugin said wryly. "A woman like her might after working in dancehalls and gambling joints and under suspicion as to how her husband died."

"I guess so. She didn't fool me. Anyhow . . . so they got the jump on you and came after me for money. And then you got the jump on *them* and came after me to put me in an ant hill."

"That was to come later, if Nino didn't get the upper hand. I had no intention of killing you now. I came after you because I needed your guns. I still do—if you've got sense enough to know what's best for you."

Wallace paused, in the act of stripping off his wet shirt. "Come again?"

"Nino knows we're following another man because he can read tracks like you can read a letter or newspaper. He knows you're not far ahead. The six of us together might have a chance. If those four dumb sheep down there face it alone, after you kill me, Nino will get them and he'll get you too. You better turn me loose, Wallace. You need me as much as I need your guns. If you kill me, you'll have around sixteen tough Apaches on your trail who know this country better than any white man. They'll get you and you won't die easy.

I've seen Nino work before."

Wallace had the wet shirt off by now and the dry one in his hands. The rain was still pelting off Cugin's shoulders even in the lee of the rocks. It kept whipping around in gusts and changing direction.

Wallace appeared to ponder a moment, then slowly shook his head. He grinned a bit. "No go, Charley. This rain will blot out tracks and give me plenty of start while this Nino occupies his time with them four money hunters. I'll have plenty of time. Would you like to see that money? Here it is."

He lifted two canvas sacks from the bag. The sacks were rounded out but soft as though wadded with paper.

THE RAIN ceased as suddenly as it had come. The clouds roiled on and the wind began to die down. Wallace proved his knowledge of plainscraft by bringing from beneath the tarp shelter a pile of dry brush he had provided. He began to build a fire. He had some beans and boiled potatoes in onionskin sacks and these he heated while the deer steaks broiled over the coals. They ate in silence, finished the meal, and Wallace cleaned the utensils. It was about ten thirty by now. The sky was clear.

"I'm going to turn in and get a fresh start in the morning, Charley," the fugitive told Cugin. "Sometime before daylight. You'll have to make out the best you can, which shouldn't be hard for a

[Turn page]

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man who's lived among the Apaches. When I get ready to go I'll make it as easy as possible for you. After all," pointing down to the ant hill, "I'm a *white man*."

He put both his and Cogin's weapons beside his blankets and laid down but did not remove his boots. He stretched out on his back, hands back of his head, and watched the handcuffed man by the big rock. Cogin had squatted down on his haunches. He sat there; silent, without emotion, somber eyes gazing into the now dying fire; sat there like an Apache.

Wallace thought, We're two of a kind, him and me. We don't hate each other or anybody else. Just two of a kind. The small things like love and a family and kids and respect of the ignorant in some two-bit community are beneath us. Just two of a kind. . . .

* * * * *

He pulled up in front of the small, drab building where the horses of the four men stood racked, swung down and looked up at the two Negro deputies. They were big fellows, they were newly freed, they carried the law on their shirt fronts, and they were led by a man who had a reputation for fearlessness. All three carried big brass-bound Dragon revolvers.

"Eb, you and Tom follow me to the door but don't come in," Wallace said. "I'll try to take them without trouble if possible."

The two deputies got down and obeyed. Wallace stepped to the porchless building, warped and cracked after four years of abandonment during the war. He moved into the drab interior decorated only by a crude bar and some equally crude chairs and table. There were six men inside. Four of them had been trailed here. The shadows of the two Negro deputies darkened the door behind his broad young back.

The owner back of the bar moved ominously forward; a Texas soldier of the Confederacy who had just lost a

fight and was still filled with hatred and plain, sullen bitterness.

"You get them damn badge-packers out of here, mister," he snapped.

"They'll stay in," Wallace said tonelessly; and to the four men, calling them off by name: "I have warrants for your arrest for horse stealing. Get up and come quietly and there will be no trouble."

None of them spoke. They sat there, tough men of the Texas brush country. They too had helped to free the two Negro deputies who now had come after them. They eyed Wallace and the two, warily, and waited.

The owner said savagely, "I don't give a damn whether you want 'em for horse thievery, baby stealing, or wife beating. But there ain't no damn carpet-bagger Yankee and his two black deputies taking anybody out of this place. So get! Get!"

"They stole the horses from poor people," Wallace explained patiently; "people like yourself who are trying to get a fresh start after the war. And now they can walk out on their feet or get carted out feet first."

Three of them had been carted out feet first after the roar of the old brass-bound pistols had subsided and the gun-smoke of old fashioned powder cleared away. The two Negro deputies hadn't needed to be carried out; they lay sprawled in the dirt, stone dead; shot out of the open doorway. And that alone was all that enabled Wallace to escape. He managed to get on his horse, his own gun gone, because the slug from a cap-and-ball was buried deep in his right shoulder and the hole it made bleeding profusely. He went down the street at a run, humped low over his horse, bullets from the Henry rifle of the cursing, frantically shooting saloon-owner whizzing all around him. All thirteen of them.

AND Wallace, young as he was, was too prudent and intelligent to go back, even to remain in that part of the

turbulent state that was still shaking itself savagely to clear up the wounds of the war they had helped to lose. He had been twenty-three then, fourteen years ago, in 1866, and he had shot the three of them without warning before the other three and the owner got into action; partly because he was an officer determined to take them and mostly because of the same ungovernable temper that had harried him down through the years.

The saloon with its three dead white men inside and two dead black men outside faded and he saw faces come out of the past and pass in review; the woman he had married and then left with child, dancehall girls; the faces of men crumpled before him, lax in death. He saw the piquant face of bold-eyed, flirtatious Jenny Cogin, who had led him on, teasing him by letting him pinch her; she who had paid with her life by inflaming an ungovernable temper, the only emotion in Wallace's black soul.

He thought, Why should a man's soul be white anyhow? I like it better this way. Big Gert. I think I missed out a good bet there because she's the kind of woman for men like Charley sitting over there and me. So maybe I'll change my mind. Maybe I won't go to Chihuahua City. Maybe if she gets out of this I'll go back to the settlement and get her. . . .

A yawn broke off his thoughts and he stirred beneath the shelter. "See you in a few hours, Charley," he called, and closed his eyes.

XII

BURIED in his own thoughts, Cogin made no reply, squatting there on his haunches as immobile as the rocks themselves. He couldn't climb the rope because it was impossible to get his hands above his head. So he sat there as the last of the coals became ashes and the wild animal sounds came floating through the wild, rugged country and Wallace's gentle, regular breathing

came to his ears.

Then he began to chew on the rope.

It was, luckily, not of iron hard rawhide but a manila type made in Mexico from the fibers of the maguay plant. They cut into his mouth and caused the blood to begin flowing but to this Cogin paid no heed. He held it between his manacled hands, head bent low, gnawing at it like some wild animal. The fibers finally began to give way under his teeth and saliva that made them soft and he began to tear at it almost savagely.

One of the dozing horses suddenly raised its head and gave off a soft, uneasy slobbering noise. Cogin raised up, his body tense, some kind of a cold chill that was not from his wet clothing going through him. The slobber came again and he strained frantically at the few remaining strands as he saw the movement out there.

He thought, I've got to get free. I can't let Nino stake me out after what happened years ago.

"Wallace!" he whispered sibilantly. "Wallace! Wake up! They're here!"

He didn't know whether that thing out there, crawling forward like a thick bodied timber rattlesnake, had seen him or heard him. He knew only that it was there, coming in on the camp, that he was tied and helpless to get at a gun.

"Wallace!" he roared in a ringing cry, a cry that rent the black night and went slashing down below to come back with an echo. "Wallace! Get out of there quick!"

It was then that the dark object beyond the horses sprang erect and dived at the two mounts, and even in the night Cogin saw the knife in its hand. The horses reared in fright as the two ropes were cut and then went plunging and snorting down below with rocks clattering beneath their hoofs. A mocking laugh came floating back as Wallace leaped out, pistol in hand.

"What is it?" he demanded.

His answer came in that mocking laugh again, followed by bold words in

Spanish. "The name is El Señor Victorio Lopez, the bandit, señores. I will talk with you tomorrow."

Wallace stood there for a moment as though in indecision, and then stumbled over to where Cogin stood. "That sounded like Spanish," he said. "I can only speak a half dozen words."

"I'm damned glad it wasn't *Apache*," grunted Cogin. "That's what I thought when I first saw him crawling up. I tried to call you but you were dead to the world. I had to yell."

The sounds of the horses were still coming from below and Wallace, the temper that had caused him so much misfortune during his earlier yers set afire, lifted his pistol and drove three shots down the slope, the foot long orange flames lighting up briefly the night around them.

"That's fine," Cogin said bitterly, bitingly, as the mocking laughter rose in chorus all around them. "Go right ahead. Tell Nino and his men exactly where we are."

WALLACE grunted a sour curse at the rebuke, turning, the gun dangling at his leg. He said in the darkness, "Well, it looks like we're afoot and surrounded by some two-bit Sierra Mexican outlaw and his men. That much I could understand. Now what do we do?"

"You can cut me loose and give me my guns," Cogin said harshly. "He said he'd talk with us in the morning. But if he had been ten minutes later I'd have been free and we'd be on our way back down to where those four scared sheep are waiting for mine and your guns. You better cut me loose. We're both in the same boat now, and after that shooting—with no horses—things are going to get worse. That bandit will probably hold us here just long enough for Nino and his men to finish off the woman and her three companions and then come on and wind up the rest of it. I know Nino. I was raised with him. If he hits their camp tonight and finds me gone after you he'll take as many prisoner as pos-

sible and be hot on our trail. And the great Mexican bandit, el Señor Victorio Lopez," bitterly, "will accommodatigly hold us here for a final grand Apache party. Cut me loose, you damned fool!"

Wallace did not hesitate. He took his sheath knife and cut the rope at the chewed spot, a slight grunt of surprise coming from him. He used a key to unlock the rusty handcuffs and Cogin went to the shelter. He slung his waist cartridge belt around him and then put on the other that Wallace had previously removed while tying him up. Stoically he took his big rifle and went back to the place where he had been squatting.

"You seem to be pretty good at climbing rocks," he pointed out to the man who was no longer his captor but a companion. "I'll watch the east side, down the slope. You take the west."

They took up their respective positions, Cogin with his back to the perpendicular side of the rock, looking in one direction, to the east, Wallace, four feet above, watching the darkness to the west. The coyotes howled and the lobos gave off their harsh roars and amid it came the sounds of much gleeful laughter somewhere out there in the now chilly night. Neither of the two men spoke or smoked during the vigil. It grew biting cold in the early morning hours and Cogin's wet clothes, like ice now, sent shivers through his body.

He saw the first signs of daybreak, a light curtain pulled across the distant mountain tops toward which he sat facing, and then he saw smoke far down below. Señor Lopez, it appeared, was up and around for an early breakfast.

"We might as well eat," Cogin said to Wallace and rose to stretch the kinks from his knee joints and shake some of the cold out of his frame. "Smoke from the fire will give them the idea we're not too worried. Once I convince that two-bit bandit that Nino and his warriors are due any time now today, it'll be the great Señor Lopez's turn to start worrying. You keep watch. I'll build the fire."

He built it between two rocks, and because the wood was wet it threw up a long, thin plume of gray smoke tinged with yellow. A voice from far down below, carrying easily through the distance separating the two smoke plumes, floating up to them; mocking, derisive.

"Hey, señores, maybe you slept pretty good last night, eh?" It was followed by a small chorus of coarse guffaws.

Wallace, atop the tallest of the rocks in the cluster, cursed.

"Let him laugh," Cogin said. "Nino will get the last one—on all of us."

"Don't say a thing like that," snapped Wallace. His face was unshaven, tired, drawn, the strain of the night's vigil showing. "I don't mind getting killed off, if I got to go sudden like. I've expected something like it for years. Every time I moved in on a man for a final showdown that meant one of us was going to die I was all tight and maybe scared inside but I wasn't afraid because I knew if I got it it would come plenty sudden. But this kind of a thing—trapped this way. Bottled up and waiting for a bunch of Apaches. . . ."

He cleared his throat, coughed, spat savagely against the side of a rock.

THEY ate big chunks of the half raw deer meat, broiled over the fire's live coals, smoked cigarettes. Half an hour later the distant voice, closer now, hailed them again. It came from behind a rock some two hundred yards away.

"Hey, señores, do you speak Spanish?"

"What do you want?" Cogin called back in the same language.

"I want to talk with you. Maybe you come down and talk with me, eh? Victorio Lopez is an honorable man. I will not try to trick you."

"I'll meet you half way," Cogin answered. "In the open."

"Very well. But no tricks. I have many men with me."

Cogin turned to Wallace. "What kind of a rifle have you got?"

"A fifty-six caliber Spencer. Seven

shots from the tube magazine in the stock, and I've got two spare tubes. I can throw out twenty-one shots pretty fast."

"It's not worth a damn for range but you shouldn't miss at a hundred yards. Cover me while I go down. He wants to *habla*. If they try anything get this Lopez first and then use my forty-five-seventy to make it hot for the others at long range. Army sharp-shooters have hit a man at a thousand yards with one of these guns, using that new fangled telescope sight."

He left his belt and rifle with Wallace and came out into the open, moving down across ground that sloped gently, the rawhide soles of his moccasins making no sound in the grass. He had to leap a three-foot-wide chasm thirty feet deep in the earth and he wondered idly if it had been caused by a cave in of one of the old lost Spanish *Conquistadores* mines worked by Indian slaves or if there was an earthquake fault running through here.

The thought left his mind as a man in white cotton shirt and pants, boots and big straw sombrero, rose into sight and came to meet him.

"Ah, greetings, señor. It pleases me much to see you this fine morning after the rain. And now we talk, eh? I am the great bandit, Señor Victoria Lopez."

XIII

ZESTFUL, confident, full of life, he stood there with his legs braced apart, in all his self-importance and self-glory, a really great, veteran bandit—all of twenty-five years of age. Certainly no more than twenty-six; illiterate, boastful, confident. Criss-crossed over his shoulders were two bandoliers carrying an odd looking cartridge, probably for a rifle of German or Austria-Hungarian make that had found its way across the broad Atlantic and, by devious methods, ended up in the fastness of the wild Sierra Madre, the Mother Mountain. In the hands of a man who believed him-

self to be really great. His inch long black whiskers grew in sparse patches; along his cheeks, at the upper corners of his mouth, at the point of his chin. Under other circumstances he would have appeared ludicrous.

"What do you want?" Cugin asked curtly. "Talk fast and get it over with. You're covered with a rifle from up above. If you try any tricks, my friend will shoot you down like a dog."

"And you, too, my friend," laughed the other.

He stood there looking at Cugin, weighing shrewdly what lay back of the blank face of this tall *Norte-Americano*. A tough one, this one. And not afraid either. Not like the simple villagers he and his men terrorized to get food and horses.

"What do you want?" Cugin repeated harshly.

Lopez spread his hands expansively and shrugged. "We are but poor peons, señor, who have become outcasts because of the cruel soldiers and the cruel hacendados. All the time we hide like the animals in the wilderness. We have no homes; no wives and children, no money. Perhaps you have a few of the American dollars you could give us to share with the poor."

"Sell those two horses you stole last night and use the money," Cugin said coldly.

That expansive shrug again. "Ah, no, we need the horses to flee from the cruel ones who oppress us. But with a little money—"

Cugin sneered at him. "If you stick around here much longer you won't need money or anything else, sabe? Back over that ridge and down the slope a few miles are a bunch of Apache raiders on my trail. They'll be here any time between now and tomorrow. The best thing you can do is to give us back our horses and get the hell and gone out of here as fast as you can ride. If you don't you and your men are as good as dead right now."

Lopez laughed at him, leaning back

with hands on his slender hips and legs braced apart. "Ho-Ho! The American is a very cunning man. You are a liar like all the rest of them. You think to scare Victorio Lopez with these wild stories. You waste your time, mister."

"Have it your own way," Cugin grunted. "But you get no money from us. And if you try to attack us, we'll hole up in the rocks and fight it out with you."

"With how much water? What you have in your sacks? How long will it last?"

"Long enough to see you and your two-bit bandits and robbers get cut to pieces by some Apache fighters," was the ominous reply. "I give you one more chance to save your life. Give us back our horses and then get out of here fast."

"Your words are on deaf ears, mister. I am not so much of a fool to believe you. It is the cunning of a North American. I know you well. I have killed two of your prospectors already. They spoke as you speak. So I shall give you one final chance for your lives. We want what money you have and your guns—"

He broke off, leaving the rest of it unsaid, staring angrily at Cugin's moving back, for Cugin, his patience exhausted quickly, plus something else in his mind, was already returning up the slope down whence he had come. He leaped the narrow chasm again and found Wallace waiting for him, rifle in hand.

"Well?" asked Wallace.

CUGIN told him what had happened. Wallace's uneasy face expressed disapproval. "Hell, you're crazy, Charley! Why didn't you deal? I've got stacks of money in those two canvas bags, as you know. We can buy our way out and buy back our horses. Go down and deal with him."

Cugin reached for the new tobacco sack Wallace had given him to replace his other, soaked by the rain. He looked at Wallace and actually grinned. A dour expression unusual to his countenance

for he very rarely smiled. He grinned again as the shot spanged out from somewhere down below and a bullet spat off a rock four feet above their heads.

"He wouldn't sell us those cayuses for pure gold because they're too valuable up here, and we couldn't do anything without them. And I deliberately told him about Nino, knowing he wouldn't believe it. So all we have to do is just hole up here in comfort with enough water and hope that Mr. Lopez won't go away. His shots will tell Nino where to come and in the melee we just *might* get out of here alive."

Another shot screamed off a rock but Cogin knew they wouldn't be throwing up too many from down there. Ammunition was too precious. Wallace sat down, grounding the butt of the Spencer between his knees, holding it upright.

"And the others down below?" he asked.

Cogin said coldly, "I've done the best I could for the four. I came after you to get you and take you back down there to help us all but things kind of came out differently. We're hemmed in by Mexican bandits holding us here for Nino until he comes. So from now on I'm looking out for a man named Charles Cogin and nobody else. We'll fight it out together and try to get away. If we make it and get into the clear, I'll kill you the moment I get a chance."

"So will I," Wallace answered. "Well, now that that's settled how about you taking that long-range gun of yours and burning a few cotton shirt tails?"

"Don't be a damned fool, Wallace. I'm saving ammunition and saving all of them for Nino and his warriors. Just get back up on top and keep an eye open. They think they've got plenty of time and we haven't got any water. They don't know how little time they have left."

"And neither do we," Wallace, the murderer, said.

Wallace climbed up into a snug pocket among the rocks above and settled himself with a grunt, cursing silently and

bitterly the fates that had brought him to this. It was one thing to go in with a couple of Negro deputies and bring out his men dead or alive, or be packed out himself. It was quite another thing to be hemmed in, helpless to escape . . . And with plenty of money, now useless paper.

"Hey, Charley!" he called out suddenly.

"Yea?" came from below.

"Those birds have probably got poor guns. Why can't we go out of here on foot and you hold them off at long range?"

"Too much timber for them to get close, ride around in front and ambush us, a half dozen other things. I had that in mind all along. If things get too hot, we might try it."

Wallace cursed again and paid no heed to the slug of lead that chipped a white splotch in a rock four feet away. He flattened out on his stomach and eyed the terrain to the west.

ON THAT same morning when day-break showed that the rains had gone and the sun would soon be out to begin drying up the vast land Nino, the raider had already finished breakfast. It had been a particularly good breakfast because some of it had come from the pack on Cogin's dead horse, plus several choice chunks of meat cut from the killed animal's loins. The Apaches had borne the elements of the previous night stoically but the warmth of the fires was welcome. They were three hundred yards to the south of where the three men and women were camped.

Some of the younger, more impatient warriors had been grumbling. And so had one or two of the older ones. The brother of the army scout Tacana said it.

"I want the woman," he told Nino. "All my life I have been a good fighter and provider of food for the old and the crippled and my own family as well, but I have never yet burned a woman with long yellow hair. I want to hang

her by her heels and let her hair trail down and then watch the fire go through it. All my life I have wanted this thing and now you say wait."

"We will wait," Nino told him. He was aware of the eyes of the others upon him, saw the sullenness in them at the delay.

"But why must we wait?" argued the older one. "They sit there like sheep, with good horses and many goods. We could have crawled up in the night and taken them all alive. If I were chief—"

"You are not a chief as an old man and I am a chief as a young man," Nino said coldly, the insult at the other's limited abilities plain in his voice. "You know that we cannot attack at night when it can be avoided. The ghosts of the old ones have come down from the adobe to roam the desert and sit at our fires and listen to us talk, and they are at peace now. They cannot be disturbed by fighting. These things you know."

He got up and picked up the prized field glasses and made his way to the top of the low ridge that concealed them from the four over there three hundred yards to the north. The "Grumbler" and one or two of the others followed. Unmindful of the icy cold against his naked belly, Nino lay down in the wet grass and focused the powerful glasses. He saw that the camp had come astir. The picketed horses close by appeared to be well fed and rested. The three foolish White Eyes men were hurriedly preparing something to eat while the foolish woman was at the spring a short distance away, concealed from the others by some rocks. She was changing into a clean dry shirt, her long hair down in back to her hips.

Nino paid no attention to her naked white breasts standing out so firmly. His eyes were on her hair that she presently began to comb and then braid. The Grumbler was right. It would make a beautiful flash of fire when strung out below her hanging head.

"Why don't we attack now?" demanded the Grumbler. "Why, I could

slip over and grab her right now while the rest of the warriors swarmed over the others and captured them all. It would be easy."

Had there been any curse words in the Apache vocabulary, Nino most likely would have used them that morning. There being none, then the next best thing was to hurl insults. And the biggest insult of all was to call a man a child. Nino did.

"You are a child," he grunted sneeringly. "You talk like an Apache boy instead of a warrior. Were your eyes not dim with age you could see that Poco's horse is still with them. And does Poco walk off on foot and leave them? Where do you suppose he is?"

"I do not know and care less," came the angry reply. "I only want to burn the woman."

"Poco is an Apache," Nino explained patiently but with a touch of exasperation. "He knew we would follow the party, because he once was one of us and knows how we think and fight. And now he is not with the others because he is up there somewhere in the brush watching and waiting for us to do just what you ask to do. You saw what he did with the big rifle. He killed three of our warriors and wounded another. And now you would go in and let him shoot us all down like rabbits. I will attack when the time is right, and you can burn the woman. But I want Poco more than the others because he is my enemy and will die strong. I will go back and beat my squaw and tell her how I caught him."

HE ROSE to his feet and went back down through the wet grass. The warriors around the small fires said nothing. One of them lay on one of Cogin's blankets, a dirty bandage around the wound in his arm. The same shot that had killed one of the warriors and gone on through had cut a furrow in the arm, painful but not serious.

Nino squatted down to warm the cold nakedness of his wet belly, the glow of

the bright coals feeling good. He was waiting with the patience and cunning that had made him a chief over much older and more experienced warriors, sending out his thought spirits in an effort to find a good omen . . .

Over at the fire by the rock, however, there was much more activity. The woman Gert came back from the spring. Her gray shirt was dry and clean and the two long braids of hair had been wound about her head in such a manner as not to interfere with the hat she customarily wore. She was hatless now, her face freshly scrubbed; and despite the boots and riding skirt she was an amazingly attractive looking woman with her tall, square shouldered figure and rounded bosom.

One-Card, working at his pack, noticed it promptly. In contrast to her his whiskers were scraggly, his clothes dirty and dank smelling from the rain. He looked more seedy than ever.

"Gert, you look positively beautiful this fine morning," he exclaimed. "I never noticed it until now; really."

"You certainly picked a fine time to," she retorted. "It's not a fine morning, I'm not beautiful, and flattery will get you nowhere with me, One-Card. There never was but one man in the world who meant anything to me and he's dead. And right now all I'm interested in is getting out of this with a live and whole skin and never mind Wallace's money. He can have it all. I did a lot of hard thinking during the night while I was on guard in the cold, and all of a sudden money somehow didn't mean as much as it did in the past."

"Well, it does to me," Bart grumbled. He too was a dank smelling, dirty sight. "As long as we've come this far and have to fight for our lives I might just as well fight for Wallace's money."

Hornbuckle said, "Let's have less talk and a little more action. That shot we heard up above might not have been fired by Cogin. It might have been an Apache bullet that *killed* him. But we're here and can't turn back. I haven't seen

a thing but I know they're out there around us somewhere. Maybe straight up the slope. Let's pack up and get out of here pronto. Bart, you saddle Cogin's horse and lead it. One-Card, you'll lead the pack stuff. Gert will ride in front of you a few feet because she's a good shot with a rifle. I'll bring up the rear a few feet behind. If we get caught, kill the spare horses quick and use them for barricades."

"And," added the woman with a soft smile foreign to her usual demeanor, "when the sun comes up, you better take a few good long looks at it. It's a beautiful sight when there's a chance you may never see it rise again."

They finished their chores hurriedly and swung into wet leather. The tracks of the horses dug in deep in the wet ground as the four of them, in a closely packed group, got under way, rifles across their saddles. There was little conversation, little need for it, and certainly little desire for it. They kept to the open as much as possible, working in through clearings. The woman watched ahead to the east, One-Card with the packhorses' lead ropes tied hard to the saddle horn watched the north from his side. Beside him, leading Cogin's saddled horse, Bart watched to the south. Bringing up the rear Hornbuckle rode with his body turned in the saddle, eyes scanning the terrain below to the west.

The sun finally did come out as they climbed higher. So far all was quiet. They saw nothing but were not deceived. They knew that Nino was out there somewhere because Cogin had said so. And in the mind of the woman that made it so. She half smiled a little at the thought. He was a cold devil, this Cogin, but he had in him many of the qualities of her late husband, tall and commanding and with the kind of aloofness that made men respect him.

They came out into a clearing where the timber was falling away toward a larger area of grass still further up. She twisted in the saddle and shifted

the rifle, wondering again about Nino.

She was unaware that Nino was very close by now, because Cugin's empty saddle said that Cugin was somewhere up ahead on foot and that the others were going to him. Now was the time to strike.

And Nino struck; swiftly, savagely.

XIV

FIRST indication that the raiders were anywhere near was when the shrill yell came from a point two hundred yards to the south; Nino's signal. An answering yell came from over on the opposite side, and then the whole area became a scene of murderous activity as the dark forms came at them from all directions. One moment there had been nothing, the next there were sixteen or more coming in at a run, screeching and firing.

The horses began to rear and snort and the woman paid no heed. She was working the lever of her rifle, a .44-40, as fast as she could aim. She heard dimly a terrified cry from One-Card and even in the maelstrom the thought flashed through her mind, he's no good at gambling and no better in a fight. Bart was yelling and firing too while Hornbuckle, who had been smoking, clamped his pipe stem between his teeth and coolly shot one warrior dead and then killed the horse of another.

"Up ahead!" cried out the woman. "Spur through them!"

They tried it the best they could, the horses needing little urging. That first savage burst of firing had driven off the raiders. One casualty for them and, as far as she could tell, none for their little party of four.

They were running now with the warriors on each side and a few shots still banged out. She looked over at One-Card as she feverishly thumbed more cartridges into the magazine. The man was running with the pack horses tied up close, his unshaved face a mask of terror. He was doing no shooting at all,

having emptied his pistol as fast as he could pull trigger on the self-cocker. He had dropped his rifle in fright the moment the attack started.

And it was just as she glanced at him that an Apache fired a shot from about a hundred yards away. It struck one of the pack horses tied up to One-Card's saddle. The horse went berserk with a scream that was almost human and began to buck and lunge. And when it did One-Card's own mount, spooked completely, took the bit in its teeth and began to run—straight toward three of the warriors out there.

"Come back here!" roared Hornbuckle.

"Fall out of the saddle!" screamed the woman. "Let them go."

Whether he heard her or whether he did it on his own she didn't know. But he made a leap from the saddle, struck heavily on his back, knocking all the wind out of himself. She saw the swiftly speeding ponies come in at a run with those fierce-visaged, dark-bodied figures hunched up in their rawhide saddles. She shot hard and fast from the back of her own running horse as the three swooped in on One-Card, bending low in the saddles.

She fired her last shot from the rifle and knocked one of them off his horse, a lucky shot but not enough to prevent what happened. The other two, running side by side swooped down over One-Card, now trying to rise. Dark arms flashed down and each grabbed him by a hand, an easy trick that they had done since childhood. In the face of the fire the horses cut over into a circle and spurred away out of range with One-Card dragging between them.

They had him alive, and you could tell it in the chorus of gleeful yells that almost burst their throats.

There was nothing to do but spur on. They came out into the wider clearing now some six or eight hundred yards across and saw a cluster of big rocks many feet high. Still in the lead the woman Gert made straight for the clus-

ter. The Apaches were closing in again for a second raid in the open, trying to cut them off from the sanctuary of the rocks. But fate had intended otherwise that morning.

She heard the booming roar of a heavy rifle up ahead, followed by the crack of a different toned weapon. The second weapon was being worked with amazing rapidity. The raiders wheeled off from this new and unexpected fire and the woman Gert spotted the two men up there.

SHE saw Cogin and she saw Wallace; she caught a startled glimpse of straw sombreros and white cotton shirts and pants fleeing; she saw one of them—El Señor Victorio Lopez, the bandit—running straight toward the rock cluster itself.

Then they were around the rocks into a clutter of more rocks and a tarp shelter and the ashes of a cooking fire. They jerked their panting horses to a halt, saddle leather creaking wetly and nostrils flaring from the hard run as Cogin slid down from above. He was methodically loading his big single-shot .45-70 rifle.

He said, "Well, I see that you made it," and spoke to nobody in particular.

She swung to the ground and pushed up at a hatbrim that wasn't there. The wind had carried it away. The sun now shone brightly on the golden braids coiled around her head.

"You didn't come back to us," she explained simply where none was needed. "So we came to you."

He shrugged. "One place is as good as another. Where's the other fellow."

"One-Card? The fool had the pack horses tied hard to his saddle horn instead of looping or dallying. When a bullet struck one of them and it went loco, he couldn't get loose, not with his own horse spooked and running with the bit in its teeth. He rode right square into three of them. I got one of them with a lucky rifle shot but they got him. They got him alive, Cogin," she

added with a shudder.

The others had also dismounted and now stood in a small group, huddled up as though for protection. Wallace sat up some ten or twelve feet above them. He was looking down sardonically, though when he looked at the woman with the golden hair now glinting in the bright sun, the expression in his eyes changed. He was thinking, If she had looked that beautiful down in the settlement when she was after my money she would have got it and we wouldn't be here like this now. If Cogin can only get us out of this and I can kill him I'll take her right back, as I should have done at first.

His thoughts were interrupted as he suddenly swung up the Spencer and lined the barrel down at a slant, over the heads of the group below.

"Hold on, you yellow-bellied coyote," he snapped from back of the sights to El Señor Victorio Lopez who was panting toward them. "That's close enough."

Lopez stopped and grinned up at him. "Ah, greetings to you, Señor. My men are the big cowards I have always known they were. But not Lopez. So I come to help you fight the Indios because I'm a very brave man."

"I don't savvy a word you're saying, Bosco, but you got about two seconds to get going before I put a slug between your narrow eyes, you horse stealing—"

"Hold it, Wallace," Cogin called up. "He came to join us when his men fled."

"He was up within a hundred yards on foot, watching us, and couldn't get away," snarled Wallace. "I could have shot him a half dozen times. I'm going to do it now."

"We'll need his gun," was the reply. And in Spanish to the grinning bandit: "You can come in and fight with us because we are all now in the same fix. I warned you about the Apaches, but you, *tonto sabia* (wise fool), wouldn't listen."

The mocking smile was still there as Lopez swept off his huge straw sombrero

and bowed. "I was the wise fool indeed. And now I offer you my life."

Cogin said to the others, "He's in with us and maybe that foreign rifle he's carrying will come in handy. But watch him. He'll grab a horse and slip out if he gets a half chance."

The bandit came up among them and again the sweeping bow, this time to the woman. "Ah, such a beautiful woman for these poor eyes. Now if I die, I can die happy after seeing such beauty."

She asked curiously. "What did he say? My packers talk English."

"Nothing important," grunted Cogin.

HORNBUCKLE was reloading his long-stemmed corncob pipe. He looked at Cogin. "What will they do next, Charley?"

A shrug. "All depends on what Nino thinks. If he can hold us here he'll take his time. If he thinks we might make a break for it tonight he'll drop the horses from cover."

"And One-Card?"

Again the shrug. "If Nino thinks he has plenty of time with us, he'll stake him out or tie him to a tree. If he thinks we'll try to run for it tonight, he'll either burn him head down today or put him in an anthill."

"Merciful heavens!" shuddered the woman, and there was none of the former hardness in her now. She was a mere woman with a woman's gentle feelings.

"He took his chance," Cogin snapped at her. "He knew what he might run into. He was a gambler and he lost."

"Yes," she nodded slowly. "He was a gambler who lost all his life. And when he made a final big gamble, the biggest of his unfortunate life, he lost that one too."

He didn't answer that one but turned to the others. "There's not room in here for the horses. Take them out a few feet and tie them so that we can make a run for it fast if we get a chance. Hey, Wallace. See anything?"

"Yea. I see lots of things. They're out there in plain sight but out of range. Just seem to be waiting. They're got the gambling gent tied on the ground but don't seem to be doing anything. Better come up and have a look, Charley. You know more about these mean devils than I do."

Cogin picked up his rifle and started to climb up and found the woman just behind. He reached the top, gave her a hand, and they went over to where Wallace sat peering over the top.

"Maybe they chased them bandits and we could get through what's left," Wallace suggested.

"Not with a bag like this surrounded, as we are. They'll kill Mexicans out of habit, because they're natural enemies. But we're what he wants—and me in particular. We've been enemies for a long time and an Apache—particularly one like Nino—doesn't forget."

He lay there between the man who had killed his sister and the woman who had hated him because of his indifference but not any more. Out there he saw them lounging around in groups of twos and threes. In between, alone, were the younger warriors, making a complete circle all around them; ready and waiting for whatever Nino decreed.

"I see they're building a fire over there, but not where One-Card is bound, thank heaven," the woman's voice beside him said. "Looks like they feel pretty confident of us to sit down and eat in the middle of the morning."

He said, "Go over and tell one of the men below to build up a fire and then have some green brush ready. Nino will be wanting to talk."

She shot him that strange look that sometimes came across her face, now within inches of his own, but obeyed. Minutes passed. None of the warriors had moved. Some sat their horses as immobile as stone statues. Others lounged on the ground near their ponies. Hornbuckle and the others were on guard down below. Presently a plume of smoke arose out there in the distance

and with it came the distant boom of a big rifle. A leaden slug struck into the rocks, fired from long distance, and went off into the sky with a wheezing scream.

"Oh, oh!" ejaculated Wallace. "So he wants to talk, eh? Like that."

"He'll want to talk in person and that was just to let me know that all his men are not armed with old guns. He's just warning me that if I try anything funny that Apache gunner of his will know what to do."

The first puff balls began to go up and Cogin lay there and watched them as of old, thinking that, had it not been for that shot through his shoulder those years before at the settlement—the shot that had taken him from the Apaches and returned him to the whites—then most likely he himself would be out there with Nino or perhaps in Nino's place.

THERE was a brief interval between the puff balls and then they began again. After that a single, yellowish puff and no more. The message was ended.

Cogin hurriedly slid down the face of the rock to the fire. Hornbuckle had built it and broken off some green branches. From above the tense face of the woman watched as he covered the fire with the evergreens and picked up Wallace's saddle blanket. Not a sound came from the group as he spread the blanket over the smoke and went to work. The answering puff balls rolled straight up out of the huge cluster of rocks and into the breezeless morning sky. The others stood silently and waited as the answer continued to shoot up, their faces expressing various emotions. Finally he tossed the blanket aside and rose.

"What's it all about?" Hornbuckle asked.

"Nino wants to talk with his 'brother.' Says he'll meet me half way alone under a white flag. That means a word of honor. I'll go see what he wants."

"Yeah?" asked Bart. "And make a

deal to leave us here while you get away?"

"Shut up, Bart." Hornbuckle snapped. And to Cogin: "Think there's any way you could get us free? Maybe the promise of lots of horses or something?"

"He can get all he wants in Mexico and from ranches north of the line. I'll go see what he wants."

He picked up his rifle and went out to the horse Bart had led saddled from the previous camp. He shoved the big weapon into its boot and was preparing to swing up when he felt a hand on his shoulder; a hand so gentle it was almost timid. He let his foot down out of the stirrup and faced her.

"Charley, I'm scared," she said almost pleadingly.

"So am I," he said harshly.

"You're the only hope we have to get out of here alive."

"I didn't ask you to come," he told her in that quiet, hard way that years among his family had never been able to soften. It was the remnants of the Apache in him. He was talking—and thinking—like an Apache now.

She nodded almost humbly. "I know you hate me because I was greedy, because it's been suspected that I killed my husband. But I don't want to fall into the hands of those cruel things out there. If—if anything happens that you don't come back, what must we do?"

He looked at her out of blue eyes that were without emotion. "Keep shooting until you have one bullet left. Then use it."

He swung up into the seat, reined the horse around, and rode out from the cluster of rocks. He saw another figure on a horse, over there in the edge of the timber to the south, gig into motion and ride out to meet him half way.

After twelve years he and Nino were to meet again—still enemies.

XV

MOVING at a slow pace, they jogged on toward each other while the eyes of

those hemmed in the rock cluster and the eyes of the stoically waiting warriors watched. The pony bearing Nino came on, slowed to a walk, and Cogin looked him over.

He hasn't changed much, he thought. He's a little taller now and matured but his face is the same, and I know he saw me through those glasses of Horn-buckle's and was grinning when he called by smoke for a talk.

The ponies were within thirty feet of each other when both riders came to a halt. Nino was naked to the waist and wore a rag around his forehead but did not have the lateral streak of white beneath his eyes. He might have washed it off before riding out. At any rate they sat there for a few minutes and stared at each other without speaking, as was customary. Nino carried a Henry rifle across his saddle; a thirteen-shot weapon used very successfully during the Civil War but, like the big Spencer, not much for long range. Finally he pulled his tough little pony into a walk and they came up close. Cogin still waited in silence. It was Nino who spoke:

"So Poco has come back to the land of the Apache!"

"I have returned to the land of the Americanos. The Apaches have no lands now. The White Eyes have taken it from you."

Nino's eyes flashed but he said nothing as he swung down from his pony and Cogin followed suit. They sat down on their haunches, facing each other, studying each other in detail.

"It is good to see you again after all these years, but you are a White Eyes now and my enemy."

"That is true."

"There are many things of the old days we could talk about."

"Many things. I remember the old warriors, the pretty girls like Keneta."

Nino's eyes flashed with a touch of boastfulness back of a plain grin. "She is my squaw now and in my jacal with three little ones," holding up three fingers.

"She would be mine to beat now if you had pulled me off the ground the morning of the big raid when I was taken by the White Eyes. But you were young and weak then and could not lift me."

"I was never young and weak. I have been strong all my life. I have been a chief for six grasses now."

This was the kind of preliminary thing that had to be done, with before Nino stated his purpose in calling for a talk. They spent several minutes talking over their boyhood days together; the summer hunting trips, their training by the older warriors, the various fights. Cogin did not ask about those who might now be dead. Once a warrior was gone to the abode his name was never mentioned again. They discussed the recent raids and Nino did a bit of boasting about how the White Eyes soldiers could not get him, even with scouts like old Tacana helping them.

This brought the opening that Cogin had been waiting for. He said, "I saw Tacana with the White Eyes soldiers a few suns back."

"His brother, the Grumbler, is with us now."

"And does he, too, hate the White Eyes you now have surrounded in the rocks?"

"He wants to burn the woman with the yellow hair and watch the fire go through it. I have one of your warriors as a prisoner. But he will not die strong. I have come to trade you this weak one for the woman with the yellow hair."

HE WAS very sincere about it because to him a squaw was something to work hard, bear children, and be beaten at her husband's will. He appeared genuinely surprised when Cogin refused. He grunted his contempt—and perhaps disappointment.

"The White Eyes have made you weak and foolish, Poco. You are no longer an Apache. But you will die strong and I will go back and beat Keneta and tell her how you died."

It was Cogin's turn to grunt his con-

tempt. "Two suns back I killed three of your warriors and wounded another. Alone. You were many and I was one. I killed your warriors and escaped. Now I have White Eyes with good guns and I have one Me-hi-cano with a good gun. You are a fool."

Nino's smouldering black eyes flashed and his lips thinned. No man yet ever had called him a fool and lived.

"You have no water except in your skin bags. None for your horses. I have much water and much time. My warriors will dump much water on the ground for you to see while the sun burns your tongue."

"Warriors cannot dump water without eyes to see. They will have no eyes by the time the sun burns my tongue." (This was in reference to the fact that certain birds such as magpies always got to a dead man before the coyotes and buzzards and pecked out the eyes. It also was another insult to Nino).

It made him angry. That was plain to see in his burning eyes and the way his mouth had lost its grin and was now a thin, twisted slit set in his almost black face. But he patiently tried another tack, the first having failed.

"You are a White Eyes now but were a great warrior even when young and fighting with your people. You belong with us again because no matter how many White Eyes soldiers we kill more come like the leaves of grass to take their places. Our numbers are few and we do not have others to replace the ones gone to the abode. You have lived among the White Eyes for many grasses now. Twelve grasses," holding up all fingers and thumbs and then two more. "You know their ways. Bring the woman with you and come with us and I will let the others live. Take the woman as your squaw and fight with us until they give us peace. Then you can talk for us and be a great man."

It didn't sound, on the surface, as illogical as it might have under other circumstances. Cogin could have, on the surface, done that very thing. That

would have freed the others, saved himself along with the woman, and he might have been able to make the higher chiefs realize just how hopeless their fight against the whites was. Some of them had never wanted to fight and, for that matter, still didn't. A few of the tough, treacherous ones like Geronimo did.

Cogin shook his head. "I am not a fool and I do not listen to a warrior who speaks with a forked tongue."

"I speak with a straight tongue," snapped Nino, rising to his feet, the muzzle of the gun held so carelessly but slanting dangerously close toward Cogin's waist.

"You broke your word to the White Eyes soldiers many times. You said you would raid no more. Now you would take me to your camp and burn the woman's hair and tie me to a post and work on me as you helped work on the soldier when we were together, when you dropped the live coal on top of his head after three days at the post. You would capture the others in the rocks and do the same. Then you would return to your band and boast. We will speak no more."

He, too, had risen and stood beside his horse. They both mounted cautiously. Nino sat eyeing him warily, the anger and disappointment plain in his eyes. Both his bluff and his trickery had failed.

He said, "We will speak no more until I have you at the post. Then I will talk with you for three days because you will die strong."

NINO turned his back and rode away and Cogin did the same. Up in the rocks Wallace, flat beside the woman, heaved a sigh of relief. He had told her the circumstances of Cogin and himself being in camp together and now he spoke again.

"I don't know what happened out there, Gert. We'll know pretty soon now. But I've just finished telling you what's going to happen if we get free. One of

us has got to kill the other. I think it'll be me. That means you and I can take my money and start out new someplace where we're not known—and I've got plenty of money. Two whole canvas sacks of it down there under the tarp. It's yours for the asking."

Her eyes were still on Cogin now loping toward the place where the others waited so anxiously. She said, "I've had many men try to buy me but none under quite such circumstances. We're not out of this yet by a long shot. You'd better guard your money and keep your rifle handy. I'm going down and see what happened."

Cogin came back and swung from his horse. The anxious eyes of the group were upon him. He strode in among the rocks, rifle in hand.

"Any luck?" asked Hornbuckle in a voice studiously casual.

"About what I expected," Cogin replied. "He tried bluff and then trickery?"

"What kind of bluff and trickery?"

"He wanted to trade One-Card for the woman so they can burn her yellow hair. He thought quite honestly that he was offering a good bargain. To them a woman means little except to work and be beaten, but One-Card handling a rifle against them was his idea of giving us the best of the deal. I didn't bother to tell him that the woman here can handle a gun more effectively than One-Card. So when I turned him down he made an offer that sounded really good. He said that the rest of you could go scot free if I'd bring the woman as my squaw and come back and join the tribe for awhile as an adviser until peace is made. Said I'd be very valuable in talking terms with the soldiers because I've lived among the whites for so long."

"That don't sound like trickery to me," broke in Bart excitedly, hitching at the belt below his protruding stomach. "That sounds like good common-sense. We could all get out of here with whole skins, even old One-Card. You ain't going to let 'em torture One-Card and

the rest of us, are you?"

The woman said, "You think it's trickery, Charley? I'd go with you in a minute if you said it was all right. If you want a 'squaw,' say the word."

"Thanks," Cogin said dryly. "But it's not all right. They'd burn you, bury One-Card in an anthill, and put me to a post for three days. The rest of you wouldn't have a chance."

"But you *know* them people!" cried out Bart again.

Cogin said coldly, "Yes, I know Nino. That's why I turned him down."

"Well, what's the next move then?"

"We'll wait, of course. We can't do anything else at the moment."

"Frankly, Cogin, I think that's plain damned foolishness," Hornbuckle put in. "The longer we stay here, the worse shape our horses are in. If we come out of here with guns going and fight hard enough some of us at least might get through. And to my mind that's a lot better than winding up in their hands. I'll take my chance."

"So will I!" cried Bart.

"That goes for me too, Charley," Wallace called down.

"What about you?" Cogin asked the woman.

"You're the one man who can get us out of this fix, if anybody can. Without you there's no doubt of what the end will be. I'll do whatever you say."

"Well, well, well!" jeered Bart and gave off a coarse laugh. "So our hard, tough, greedy Gert who didn't have nothing to do with no man is now a soft woman?" He changed his voice to a shrill simper: "If you want a squaw, just say the word, darling. I'll do anything you say, dearie. Just anything a-tall."

HE TURNED to Hornbuckle, the small eyes set in his flabby face cold and piercing, determination written in them. "Horn, let's you and me and Wallace take that Mexican here and the four of us fight our way out of here. Some of us can get through. And

if these two moonstruck love birds wanta stay here and gaze up at the—"

Cogin struck just once, swiftly. His right fist smashed hard against the man's jaw and Bart went down heavily, a loud grunt emanating from his huge chest. He wagged his head from side to side to clear it and rubbed at his hairy jowl. Cogin stood over him.

"You got yourself into this mess with the others. If you hadn't come along, the whole party, I mean, the Apaches would never have caught sight of me; and they couldn't have caught me even if they had seen me. I would have caught and killed Wallace by now—"

"—in an anthill," Wallace couldn't help jeering from above.

"I could have finished the job and been on my way. But you helped get me in here and you're going to help get me out, if it can be done. It's the woman and me Nino particularly wants. He wants to burn that yellow hair of hers and he wants me at a post for three days because the woman he's married to, once turned him down on account of me and hurt his vanity. So we stay. I'll kill the first man, or woman, who tries to pull out of here."

That appeared to settle the matter. Bart got to his feet, glowering and, for the moment, cowed, but the murderous fury in his eyes was plain. Cogin ordered him to go out and loose all the cinches on the saddles and bring back the water sacks and canteens. After that it was a matter of settling down to wait. The sun crawled up higher and the heat struck the rocks and turned the hemmed in group sweaty. Out beyond gunshot range the warriors waited patiently. One-Card, still trussed, had been dragged into the shade of a tree; not because of any compassion on the part of his captors but because they themselves were in the shade and wanted him close.

Cogin divided the group into two watches while the others rested beneath whatever shade Wallace's rigged-up tarp had to offer. The sun reached its zenith, beating down upon the huddled

up horses and their huddled up riders. Still the Apaches made no move that indicated action. Nino still lounged in the shade and One-Card still lay trussed up on the ground not far away. When the shade moved away they let him lie. He had been given no water.

Late that evening the woman crawled up on top and took her place beside Cogin. He lay on his stomach, the big single shot rifle beside him. It was cooler now and the group had ceased to sweat, but not to grumble. On the surface they were sticking together, almost enemies all, but of necessity.

Only the Mexican Lopez still appeared to be cheerful. He never lost his mocking grin, bravado though it might have been. It was possible that, being the only Mexican among them, he wanted to show these North Americanos that his brand of courage was superior to theirs. He could talk a little with Hornbuckle, who spoke some Spanish, and told many boasting tales of his outlaw exploits. And once, when a warrior rode in a little too close, the Mexican threw a long range shot at him with the foreign made rifle that threw up a puff of dust beside the pony and sent its rider scuttling back out of range.

The woman Gert lay down beside Cogin. She said, "They're certainly in no hurry, are they, Charley?"

He turned and looked at her in that hard, blunt way of his. "Nino has plenty of time. He might try something after dark. They don't like to because during the night the peaceful ghosts of their departed ones come down from the abode and sit around their fires to listen to them talk. Right now Nino is sending his thought spirits at me."

SHE gave him a startled look. "Trying to communicate with you?"

"That's about the size of it," he nodded. "He's gloating at me, telling me what will happen when I'm tied to a post. The Apaches do this with all their enemies in a siege like this. They believe that the thought spirits come

through and that it scares their enemies and makes them nervous and destroys their fighting efficiency when the final showdown comes. There's a lot of whites believe it too."

"And you?"

"I'm getting a little nervous, if that's what you mean. And he knows I'm getting nervous. That's why he's sending them at me."

She didn't speak for some time, just lying there beside him with her chin on her crossed forearms. Then:

"Tell me something, Charley. You said Nino hates you because of an Apache girl you took from him. A few days ago I wouldn't have asked you anything like this—but that was a few days ago, even years. Things have changed much among us all since then. You, Wallace, myself; poor Limpy, and poor One-Card lying out there in the sun all day. But about the girl?"

He said, his eyes out on the distant panorama of the great Sierre Madre, "Her name was Keneta and we'd all been just a bunch of Apache kids playing and growing up together. But when she was fourteen she went through her puberty rites lasting three days of praying and dancing and other ceremonies. After that she was a woman and eligible for marriage. I was just turning sixteen and so was Nino. So he put his horses in front of her jacal one night and let them stay tied there all the next day, which was customary. But when, on the second day, she didn't come out and lead them to water, Nino had to come get them and take them away again. His suit had been rejected. Nino and me hadn't been exactly good friends anyhow, and when she threw a stick at me a day or two later—well, that turned us into bitter enemies."

"Would you have married her?" she asked.

His eyes were still gazing out there in the distance, watching everything that moved. He said, "After the Apaches come back from a big raid they always pull a celebration of feasting and danc-

ing and any marriage rites in the offing. My marriage rites to Keneta were coming up when we made the big raid on the settlement and I got shot off my horse. That was the morning when I'd just shot Limpy's leg almost in two. Nino ran by on his horse and made a grab at my hand like those two warriors got One-Card, but he missed. If it hadn't been for his grasp slipping on my hand that morning I'd be married to Keneta by now and maybe out there in his place this morning instead of in here."

She actually smiled at him. "And I suppose you'd burn my hair over a fire while I hung by my heels from a cottonwood limb?"

"Yes," he said slowly. "It would have been a beautiful sight, watching the fire go through it and listening to you—"

"Stop it!" she broke in with a shudder. "It's too horrible to think of."

It was his turn to smile at her. "I wouldn't have thought so had I remained as one of them. They know nothing else. It's been their way of life, all the tribes, for a hundred generations before the first whites first came over from England and settled on the east coast."

XVI

RADIATING heat, the sun moved on down toward the western horizon and the shadows began to lengthen. Far, far below, miles away through openings in the trees, they could see the desert, its broad expanse turning color. The buzzards that had been circling all day as though in anticipation of what was to come, now turned lazily on outspread wings and moved on down toward the canyons toward their caves; hundreds of them in many flights. The men not on guard were preparing supper from one of the packs. Cogin still remained above, the woman beside him. Neither had moved or spoken for some time. He was busy with thoughts of the coming night, of Wallace who would kill him at

the first opportunity, of what he would do if he should get out alive.

There was nothing in Kansas to go back to. It was gone, put behind him, something to be forgotten. There was nothing particular in store for him ahead. He thought of the shooting star he had seen that night as he lay on his tarp back of Limpy's corral in the little settlement from whence they all, except the Mexican, had come. And he thought of the night ahead as darkness came down.

She lay beside him and watched as the horizon moved in closer around them, a dark circle drawing in tighter and tighter on their vision, shortening it until it soon would be but a few feet in circumference. She thought about the past. . . .

* * * * *

Out there a pin-point of light began to glow, and she watched it, saw the lamp with its smoky globe. He must have gone to sleep and the wick flared up.

He stirred as she came into the room and opened his eyes. She heard his groan again as she had heard it day and night for two weeks. She saw the blood on his lips when he spat feebly. He didn't look much like the tall, suave, soft spoken man who had first seen her in the store that day in Texas; clean shaven, immaculately dressed, a gentleman all the way through. Neither did the hands that had caressed her, later held her tight against him, and—still later—taught her how to handle a deck of cards over a dealer's chair. "Tall Jim" Saunders, the gambler.

"That you, hon?"

"Of course it is."

"Did you get it?"

"Darling, I told you there is none in this tough tent mining camp. There's no drug store, not even a doctor here."

"Then go get my six shooter from where you've hidden it. Hon, this pain. I can't stand it any more!"

"You'll have to stand it. You'll get well. I know it."

He had laughed his hollow laugh again and spat more red colored spittle.

"Sure, I'll get well," he'd jeered. "With my lungs eaten up by something that causes blood to come up. Did you ever see a man dying with a bullet in his lungs, see the terrible pain he goes through? I have. Many times. That's what's in my lungs. Not one bullet but a hundred that are biting away like red hot pokers. Hon, please! Get me my gun and then just walk out and leave me. I can't—stand it."

She had sat on the cot beside him in the big tent, pitched high in an Arizona gulch, on a hillside. The lamp was still smoky. She let it smoke as she reached into the pocket of her dress and brought out the bottle of laudanum. Tincture of Opium, it said on the label, and she'd lied to him and said there was none to be had in camp.

His eyes were closed in pain when she kissed him on the forehead and quietly left the tent. At the flap she turned. The lamp globe she had cleaned now threw rays that illuminated the tent brightly.

On the table beside it, within reach of his frail hand, stood the bottle that would ease his pain—forever.

The Miner's Drumhead Court had been pretty tough about it, after word got around that she'd been trying to buy some laudanum. Tall Jim had been a square gambler who never cheated, who'd hand back part of his winnings to a miner in need of a stake, who never turned a deaf ear to a hungry man. The verdict was:

We, the jury, find you guilty of killing yer sick husband, Tall Jim Saunders, him coming to his death by an overdose of laudanum you give him on purpose to git him out of the way so maybe you kin have a freer hand with some of the gents who's allus around yer table. We ain't hanging no woman, but now that Tall Jim is under the sod in his last resting place you are hereby banished frum this yer camp now and forever. And we'll spread the word all over this yere territory, so folks will know you for what you are. You got anything to say before you turn yer back in this yer camp?

She had answered: "I have plenty to say. This 'trial' was a masterpiece of

self-righteousness and stupidity as only narrow and ignorant men could hold one. There was no well-meant justice. I'm not turning my back to you. I'm turning my face—at bay. Somewhere, somehow, I'm going to find a stake. When I make it I'm going to put up the biggest gambling hall in the newest and biggest camp in Arizona, where I'll meet all of you again. And when I do I'll render a verdict of my own. I'll take every penny that you dig out of the ground and send you on your way, broke and dirty, like the uncouth, ignorant tramps that you are!"

LATER, when she had time to think more coherently, she had regretted the outburst, but had not lessened her determination. Smuggling had been the way out, a means of making a stake and deliberately encasing herself in a hard shell that no man could penetrate to arouse her sympathy and affections. But her notoriety had spread far and wide and too many saloon owners bought their goods elsewhere. She had fought it out doggedly, still hoping for the stake that had not materialized.

Not until a man named Wallace had come along. Wallace the gun-fighter, and he had what she needed: His money and—his guns.

* * * * *

There were more fires springing up out there now, a full circle all around them. Gertrude Saunders still lay silently beside Cogin. Now she stirred and sat up.

"The others have eaten. I'll send Wallace up to relieve you."

The night wore on as they all finished eating and cleaned up camp. Wallace was up on top on one side and Hornbuckle on the other. All was quiet. Bart was asleep beneath the tarp, snoring loudly. Cogin, the woman, and the Mexican Lopez sat in the light of the fire. The Mexican was still his same cheerful self. He jerked a thumb toward the tarp.

"He makes more noise than the steam

train, I think," he grinned at Cogin, who interpreted. "One of my men who run away, all the time he snore until one night I get up and hit him over the head with a stick. After that he don't snore no more."

He rose, went out to the horses, and worked through them, putting his hands on their necks. Soon he came back again, shaking his head.

"We've got to get some water for them some way," he said, the grin for once gone. "It was hot all day and they had no water. Tomorrow will be worse."

Gertrude Saunders stirred on her seat, a rock by the fire. "Tell me something, Charley. Why couldn't we make a break for it in the darkness when they can't see to shoot?"

"We could try it except for one reason," he said. "I'm not exactly squeamish after the way things shaped up my life for me. Maybe it's just because things have changed a little lately. I can't go until I make a try for One-Card. After all, he's a white man."

"I knew it!" she exclaimed softly. "I knew it. You the cold, hard man without emotion, caring nothing for anybody on this earth. But you're risking your life—all our lives—to keep him from getting tortured."

"Hey," called Wallace's voice softly from above. "Better come up and have a look, Charley. There's something going on out there not too far away."

Cogin climbed back up, peering over. There was something about two hundred yards away, or even closer. He could hear a few muffled sounds that were too indistinct to identify. Not likely they would try to fire the grass. The ground was still damp and there was no wind.

"They don't make noise like that when they're coming in," he said to the gun-fighter. "You don't hear a thing. They—"

Commotion came from below, among the horses. There was the slap of a body hitting leather, the grunt of a horse as spurs dug in, and then the ani-

mal went smashing away down the slope as hard as it could go.

"Cogin, it's the Mexican!" cried out the woman. "He's gone!"

The horse was running fast; that could be told by the sounds of its hoofs. Bart had come alive and, thinking quickly for once in his life, leaped toward the tied horses to prevent a spook. Lopez was driving it hard for a point between two of those distant fires, which appeared to be about one hundred and fifty yards apart in the circle.

"The dirty stinking scum!" swore Wallace angrily. "And you're the gent who wouldn't let me shoot him when I had the chance. Well," he added grimly, "maybe he, instead of you, had the right idea! And I'll bet you two to one of my stolen bank money that he makes it."

"I'll just take that bet," Cogin snapped back. "They're not out there at those fires except to keep them burning. They're laying in close and quiet to see what we're doing. About a hundred yards—"

HE DIDN'T get to finish it before he had won the bet. Just about one hundred yards away there came a flash of fire, a tiny pin-point accompanied by a booming roar in the night. It was slanted up as though from a man standing on the ground, and it was within ten feet of the running horse. There came a scream, the thud of a body hitting the ground, and then the boom of another gun, this time the flame pointing down at a slant toward the ground.

"Pay me," said Cogin grimly. "He rode right between two of them, lying out there on their bellies and maybe hoping to crawl in and get at the horses. Nino would like that. Bart!" he called down. "You stay with those horses every minute—and don't get any ideas."

"Not me," grunted an answer from below. "If I'd had any like him, I ain't got 'em any more."

From the night all around them came

the shrill barking of coyotes. It went on for at least two minutes and then ceased; changed to shrieks of laughter and shrill, gleeful yells. All the way around them. Presently all was quiet again.

All except for those strange sounds coming from out there about two hundred yards away.

Cogin turned to Wallace, the man who had killed his sister and whom he'd trailed so many hundred miles. He shifted the newly filled belt of .45-70's to a more comfortable position over his shoulder. He still wore his moccasins.

"I'm going out and do a little scouting," Cogin said. "I want to see what's going on out there."

"You got any idea?"

"Yes," was the reply. "I'm beginning to get an idea," and made no further explanation. "You keep your eyes open and all your guns within reach. If anything breaks loose out there, shoot at anything that moves this way until you hear me whistle twice. I'll be close up and you can hear me plainly. It'll mean that I'm coming in. And you'd better keep an eye on Bart. If I get into a ruckus over there to the south, he might try to break through on the north. And give me that long sheath knife you're packing."

Wallace complied in silence and Cogin slid down the rock. Hornbuckle had come down for a moment and was smoking his pipe. Cogin told him the same as he had told Wallace. The little man nodded thoughtfully. He didn't ask any questions. He was one of the party who had never let his thoughts turn back upon his past life. They were locked up in one of the dark caverns of his mind, sealed off forever.

"Two whistles," he said. "I'll remember and tell Gert up above. And don't worry—I'll keep an eye on Bart."

Cogin nodded and tossed his hat onto a nearby rock. Hats made an outline in the night to a man lying flat on his stomach. He moved past the horses and faded like a shadow as Hornbuckle

climbed up beside the woman. Once they thought they heard a rock rattle somewhere down below and close by, but that was all.

The night had swallowed him into its black maw.

He worked his way southward on his stomach, placing the rifle out at arms length ahead and then pulling himself up to it. Three pulls forward and then a brief pause to listen. He covered fifty yards and then a hundred. The sounds were coming more distinctly now but no voices, which was to be expected. He heard the distant howls of the coyotes, few among the millions that roamed these ranges with little fear of man. The grass slid by beneath his shirt and cartridge belts but he made no sound as he moved on steadily toward his objective. He was an Apache now, stalking them in their own way on their own ground.

It took him about forty-five or fifty minutes to reach a point to where he could see anything that moved but he could not as yet tell how many were in the party. He thought, I hope one of them is Nino. If I can just kill him that will be the end of it. They'll fade away in the night and head for the territory and their home grounds.

THAT was the real reason he had refused to let the party try to fight its way out of the Apache encirclement. They might have made it . . . some of them. But even so there still would be fifty or sixty miles between them and the nearest Mexican settlement or big hacienda.

But there had been no use to explain this to the others because he had never been a man to explain things. The four fools had gotten themselves into this mess and had looked to him to get them out. He was trying it now, the Apache way.

About two hundred yards down the slope, to the east, he heard a horse snort and then begin to slobber uneasily; the two warriors who had killed Lopez finally catching up with the saddle horse

that now no longer bore a fleeing rider. But Cugin paid it no heed. He was too close now, could see the three foot high, cone shaped mound where the Apaches were working.

Four of them, he thought, and it looks like they've just about got him buried up to his neck. Nino wants him there for me to see in the morning; just his head sticking out of the ground. But there was no use in telling the others. Well, I'm glad I didn't have to use a rifle at two hundred yards.

The four were kneeling and squatting around the head sticking up out of the ground, raking the dirt up close around the neck. Another couple of minutes and they would be gone silently, not even the rustle of the grass telling of their passing. Cugin carefully laid down the Sharps rifle and eased his hand back to his sheath. He removed the six shooter, having slipped in an extra shell to fill the empty chamber he usually left beneath the hook hammer. Wallace's knife came free of the sheath. It was a long bladed Bowie and honed to a keen edge.

He was within six feet of them now, the ant mound between them. With a long intake of breath that told of the tension within he drew up one leg to a knee position, gathered himself and sprang.

He was almost on top of them before they were aware of his presence and the .44 in his hand was already flashing fire. He shot the first, the second. He killed the third. As the fourth sprang toward a rifle Cugin's fourth shot knocked him down into the grass. But the Apache was up almost in a flash, trying to swing the rifle, his shrill screech splitting the night. Cugin lunged in and swung at him first with his right hand and then left.

The gun barrel brought a yell of pain as it struck the warrior's shoulder. The slash of the knife cut it off fast. From out in the night came a series of shrill yells. The Apaches had seen the firing, heard the four shots, the yell of warning.

And they were coming. You could hear their ponies drumming hard, their cries. Cogin bent over the four, peering into each face and a grunt of disappointment went through him. He had risked all on Nino being present, on ending this thing in one savage attack. Now they were coming, he was afoot, and even if he escaped Nino would know and would not risk another such deadly raid by the White Eyes who had been an Apache.

As for Cogin, there was one small grain of satisfaction in that brief moment as he bent over the last of the four. The man who had been killed with a knife had gone to the abode with his one big ambition in life unfulfilled.

The Grumbler would never burn a woman with blonde hair.

Cogin straightened and leaped for his rifle that he had left a few feet away. He came up and stood there a moment, listening to the sounds around him, spotting their positions, the number of them.

Then he stepped forward and looked down, some kind of a fleeting thought going through his mind at what the others were doing back among the rocks.

XVII

POWER to act as he pleased, back in camp, was in the hands of Wallace. He had lain up there at his post as Cogin faded away into the night, admiration in him at the cold daring of a man who would go it like that alone. A man he intended to kill if Cogin came back alive. He had no doubt about the outcome, for he was a gun-fighter and Cogin was not. Cogin was the type who killed swiftly, without warning perhaps, and certainly without that tight feeling in the stomach that Wallace always got.

A boot scraped from below and the woman crawled up beside him. It had been fifteen minutes since Cogin had disappeared out there somewhere; fif-

teen of the longest minutes three men and a woman had ever experienced. She felt herself shivering a little and Wallace, cold nerved and calloused man that he was, turned, the darkness hiding the sardonic look on his face.

"Getting worried about him?" he asked.

"Worried? I'm ice all over. This silence and waiting, not knowing what's going on out there or what will happen."

"You'll know pretty soon," he grinned. "I've finally figured out what that noise is."

"What?"

"Didn't get it for quite awhile. Guess I'm dumb because I've been looking at it all day, aiming my rifle at it and thinking it was near the size of an Apache, thinking about how Cogin would like to have me out there by it, tied hand and foot."

"What are you talking about?" she demanded.

"An anthill, Gert. A big anthill out there two hundred yards or less. Them sounds we've been hearing are some bucks burying One-Card up to his neck; digging sounds with their knives and throwing axes. Cogin knew it too, Gert. That's why he's out there."

"Why—of course," she said softly. "He said he wouldn't leave because of One-Card. And now he's risking everything to get out there and bring him back. He's cold as ice, Wallace. He's hard and brutal like the Apaches who raised him, like this country itself is. But he's risking death and torture to do something none of us would do."

"He might as well," came Wallace's grunted reply through the night. "If he gets back and we get out it's going to happen anyhow. Because, Gert, I'm a gun-fighter and he's not."

"He's not the kind of a man who kills easily."

"He will be. And when he does go down it'll be you and me with my money. I was a fool not to have taken you up on that deal when I was in the settlement."

He was unaware that her eyes were looking at him from two feet away, something of the old hardness in them, her face harsh and disgusted.

She said coldly, "That was back at the settlement, Wallace, when I was desperate to get out of there; just any way at all. That was before I knew you killed Cogin's young sister. Oh, yes," she half jeered at him. "I know. When Cogin came in after you he wouldn't talk. We thought he was a bounty hunter, then. That's why we jumped on your trail. Limpy and One-Card and Bart and Horn—and me. We became 'bounty hunters' too. Then last night just before Cogin started on up after you on foot to bring you and your guns back to help us, he told us everything. That there was no bounty on your head, that the money would be returned to the banks from which it came, that you had killed his sister. I didn't mention it because this hasn't been the time and place to mention it. But you might as well know. I'd almost walk into an Apache camp alone than to go with a murdering, gun-fighting woman-killer like you."

"So you found out?" he sneered back at her. "And now you want Cogin, who's years younger than you."

"I doubt it. I'm twenty-nine. Not that it makes any difference. Cogin is a man with a single purpose and there is no room in his life for anything else. A strange man who has a lot of qualities that my husband had."

AN UGLY scowl darkened Wallace's face as he stared at Gert for a moment.

"Well," he sneered at her again, "if I know Cogin it won't do you any good. The day I dropped by their ranch up in Kansas to rest over for a few days, he didn't even shake hands with me. Just looked at me out of those cold eyes and walked away toward the corrals. His foolish old father was always boasting about his Apache life until I got sick and tired of it. Anyhow, when that little

seventeen-year-old kept flirting with me and teasing me, and then laughed at me. All I did was to kind of slap the day-lights out of her. I didn't intend to hurt her. It was just my temper. So I slapped her and she squalled and said she was going to tell her brother something awful about me. Well, people don't do that to Bas Wallace. So I hauled my stakes, knowing he'd be on my trail. That's why I wouldn't go with you from the settlement. I wanted to keep driving south deep into Mexico where I could buy protection with Mexican politicians to look out after me when he came. Down there I could have got him at—"

"Listen!" she interrupted.

They listened but the night brought back only silence and the continual howl of the distant coyotes. It went on that way as the minutes passed. She was ready to go back down when the shots came.

Out there two hundred yards or less from them came the four distinct roars of Cogin's six-shooter and two screeches that were not those of a white man. Wallace lifted his head higher and heard the drumming of hoofs from all over the darkness. He leaped to his feet and grabbed her by the arm.

"Come on quick! They've got him, Gert. We've got to get out of here. He'll never break through."

He jumped down below and she followed him, the fear deep inside her that more tragedy was coming. Hornbuckle looked down from above.

"Get back to your post, Wallace," he snapped.

"Post, hell! I'm getting out of here quick. Cogin's done for and those warriors on the north side are pounding around to take a hand. We're in the clear."

He dived for the tarp shelter, fumbled around for a minute, lighted a match and fumbled some more. And then his half scream of rage filled the night.

"It's gone, it's gone!" he bellowed. "My money in the two canvas sacks.

Who took it? Which one of you?"

Hornbuckle looked down from four feet above and his voice came calmly. "Why, the Mexican of course, Wallace. None of us would be fools enough. That's why he was hanging around the horses all the time. Well, it looks like Nino is a very rich man now."

Wallace stood there almost panting. The sweat actually broke out on his forehead in the darkness. Bart had run in and was half shouting questions. Hornbuckle slid down, and Wallace stood there cursing with every oath he could think of, the bitter gall making his mouth dry. He had risked his life and killed two men to get that money. He had been trailed hundreds of miles as a fugitive and living in fear of one man catching up with him from behind. And now—

He swallowed and calmed down a bit. He said hoarsely, "I'm leaving and Gert's coming with me. We're breaking through."

Her calm voice said, "Gert is staying right here and not leaving."

"Calm down, Wallace," Hornbuckle said coldly. "We stay."

"We do like hell!"

His hand flashed to his hip and dipped up. He shot Hornbuckle twice and then wheeled on Bart, standing within three feet. Bart never knew what hit him because the bullet caught him squarely between the eyes.

Wallace wheeled on her. "Now, damn you," he almost panted. "Cugin is a dead man and that leaves the two of us to face them. But I'm getting out. Are you coming or are you going to stay here and wait for them to come get you?"

Gert hesitated a moment, fear, scorn and hatred consuming her.

He was already in the saddle when she swung up beside him. They drove in the spurs and loped away into the night, leaving death and silence behind them. Silence except for the rest of the horses galloping away into the darkness. Wallace had seen to that.

AS FOR Nino, he had spent a very pleasant day. One of the White Eyes had killed himself far away down there in the desert when they had come up from behind and surprised him. That made one of the party. This morning they had attacked the others and captured a second. That made two. A third had tried to escape into the night and run right into two of his warriors. That made three.

Nino had sat there in the darkness with his dark bare back against the bole of a tree and counted them off on his fingers for the dozenth time and grinned to himself. While the Grumbler and three of the younger warriors had thrown the captive with the hairy face over a saddle and carried him away into the night Nino had continued to sit there and send out his thought spirit to Poco.

He had taunted him, had told him they had no water and that he and his men had plenty of time. He gloated over what Poco would think on the following morning when he saw the head of his friend sticking up out of the ground at the base of an anthill not far from the rocks that now were their prison. Not far from where the two of them had talked.

But he was totally unprepared for the four faint reports of a pistol when they came from far away out there; out in the direction where the Grumbler and the three others had taken the captive. He let out a screech to the warrior with him and leaped to his feet. The single rope rein of his pony was tethered to Nino's wrist and he hit the saddle in a lithe-legged bound. With the warrior close behind him he drove his pony through the night toward where the shots had come. He heard his warriors yelling and some vague instinct told him that something was wrong.

He even heard firing from up among the rock cluster and thought that it was the White Eyes shooting at his warriors in the night. His horse was heaving hard as he finally saw outlines, sent out

a signal call, and pulled up by the ant mound.

Four or five of his last remaining men sat in a circle on their ponies and said nothing. He could tell, even in the darkness, that there was death in the air. He swung down and strode over and almost stepped on the body of the Grumbler. From nearby came two more horses and the sentinels to the east pulled up.

"We killed one of them," they cried out excitedly. "He tried to run away but almost ran on top of us up close by the rocks. But he was only a Me-hi-cano. One of those who fled today when we came."

They were excited, elated; they had something to boast about when the party returned to their main camp far away to the north. But Nino paid them no attention.

"You saw nobody?" he demanded.

A warrior spoke up. "One man. He came by close to us, riding like the hawk flies. He shot once and sent one of our warriors to the abode."

Nino stood there for a moment and then went slowly to his horse. He swung up into the rawhide saddle.

"It was Poco," he said. "Nobody but Poco would have done it."

"Two of the White Eyes ran away," said another. "We heard them but were too far away."

"Poco," Nino said again, his eyes burning in the darkness. "We will wait no longer. We will go in and kill them all. Then I will catch Poco and for three days I will run burning slivers into his breast and cut away his eyelids that the sun may shine into them. . . ."

HE KICKED with his heels and they followed him without hesitation. Straight toward that cluster of rocks they drove at a run. Two of the men were those who had killed Lopez the bandit. One rode the horse with which he had tried to escape. In its two saddlebags were two canvas bags filled with green colored paper; green on one side

and gold colored on the other.

They drove straight up to the rocks and jumped down and were in among them almost in a flash, guns, knives, lances and throwing axes ready. The fire still burned brightly and in its light and the silence Nino paused to look about him.

One White Eyes, a small one with a pipe stem clenched tightly between his fingers, sat slumped against a rock as though asleep. There were two spots of blood on the front of his shirt. Another, a man as big as a fat squaw, lay flat on his back. There was nothing else to greet them.

No live ones, no horses. Nothing but two dead men, the silence of death, and a fire that already was beginning to die down. Nino turned and strode back to his horse.

"This is a place of evil," he said. "We must get away from here and follow the trails of the others."

"But the night is dark and our ghosts are abroad, those from the abode," protested one of the others. "Many of our horses are loose and there are those to be buried."

"The Me-hi-canos we chased away will return and take care of the horses after we are gone. We will send out thought spirits to the ghosts of those abroad."

He made no mention of the dead lying out there. The rage in him was too great. Poco had said that men without eyes could not see to pour water. And now there was no time for the dead. Poco had been right. There would be no water poured out on the ground while Poco's tongue was burned by the sun.

XVIII

LATER, Nino led a saddened, silent band of warriors out of there that night. They had to go at a walk for two of them were down on foot, bending low over the ground, following the tracks of the two horses. Their horses were be-

ing led. They followed the tracks in the night for more than three miles. Here they had turned from a north western direction and were heading due west; down out of the hills and toward the desert below.

"It's as I thought," Nino told his men, some eight or nine in number now. "The woman with the yellow hair and one of the White Eyes are heading for the big hacienda down there in the desert miles away. Come."

He turned off to the left and gigged his pony into a lope, the others following. It has been said that an Apache could get more speed and distance out of a horse than any rider that ever lived. They drove it to the point of exhaustion and then, cruelly, forced it to go on until it dropped from under them. They drove the ponies now, down through the timber and ran them across the open spaces. The terrain fell away, down the long slopes, and the hours passed.

They came at last to the foot of the great escarpment, having cut a long circle to get around their quarry. Now they swung to the north again for two miles. Here Nino strung out his men for another mile and a half.

They dropped from their tired ponies and waited.

They did not have long to wait. Not more than a half hour later sounds came from somewhere high above on the slope and among the trees. The coyote signals began to go out and the warriors hurriedly converged at a spot toward which the sounds were coming from. All were dismounted now; lean, lithe figures that blended with the darkness. They followed the downward progress of the two riders and moved over to intercept them.

Finally a tired horse broke through into an opening. Wallace was in the lead. Close behind him came the woman. As they reached the last fringe of trees Wallace turned in the saddle.

"We're in the clear, Gert. They can't pick up our tracks until daylight—"

Something leaped at his horse and in the lightning second that he first saw it, became aware of it, and tried to reach for a gun, he thought it was what the plains people called a catamount. It struck the side of his horse just as three others did. Fingers of steel grabbed his arm and he felt himself yanked from the saddle and smothered under snarling bodies. He heard the woman scream and then a blow struck him on the head and he knew no more.

He came out of it to find a fire going nearby. He was bound hand and foot, trussed up on the ground, and so was the woman. Nino stood before the fire, and when he saw that Wallace had come to he stepped over and kicked him in the face with a moccasined foot.

"You and the woman will die," Nino said. "You will pay for those of my warriors you White Eyes have sent to the abode."

Wallace grunted with pain and disdain. He couldn't understand a word of what the foul smelling devil was saying, but the implication was clear. But one thing could be said of the man, black souled though he was: he had courage.

He looked over at the woman and grinned. "What an end to a beautiful romance, Gert."

"No talk," snarled one of the warriors, speaking most of the English words he knew.

Nino said something to one of the others, a middle-aged warrior, who stepped forward. He grinned down at Wallace.

"Me one time scout White Eyes soldiers. You die strong."

Nino stood there looking at the woman. She stared back at him. Her face was a little blanched but that was all. Her lips were firm. He stepped over and bent down and ran his dark hands through the long braid of yellow hair entwined around her head. They came free when he yelled at them and he sat down and began to unplat them. From the warriors came little hissing intakes

of breath that told of inner excitement.

THE ex-scout grinned down at her.

"Yellow hair. Burn good," he said.

Nino straightened, letting her hair fall to the ground. He nodded toward Wallace. "Poco can not find us until tomorrow and then he will trail us here. These will die and then we'll wait for him. Tie the White Eyes to a tree."

It was then that the shot came, the booming roar of a .45-70 Sharps single shot came from not too far away. Something struck Nino in front so hard that it knocked him down and then rolled him over twice. He came to a motionless heap flat down on his face, crimson beginning to work from his dark skinned body. It glowed eerily in the light of the fire. The warriors took one look at the fallen figure and then panic ensued.

Normally an Apache didn't stampede. When ambush came they always, from instinct, reacted automatically and were gone in a flash. Then they fled. It had even happened in the big battle of Apache Pass when Mangas Colorados—Red Sleeves—and two hundred of his warriors had ambushed a large body of soldiers and penned them in for a wipe-out. But one fleeing soldier, whose horse had been shot from under him and had warriors closing in for the kill, had taken a long range shot at a big Indian and knocked him off his horse. In a matter of minutes the fight was over, the Apaches fleeing.

It happened that night at the foot of the Sierra Madre where the desert came up to meet the great Mother Mountain. Nino's warriors fled on foot and two minutes later the sound of their running horses came from below as they fled into the desert, back toward the American line, back to tell the others that Nino had gone to the Above People.

Presently, as Wallace and the woman lay there in silence, there came a footstep from nearby and a tall figure in moccasins stepped into the firelight.

"Cogin!" she cried out. "Cogin, thank God you got here in time. They said

they were going to work on us and must have thought you wouldn't be here until morning."

"We had a little ruckus out there where they were burying One-Card in an ant mound so we could see him at daylight. There were four of them covering him when I slipped up on the other side. Three never knew what hit them, they were so busy. The fourth was the one that yelled."

"We heard the shots," Wallace said.

"I grabbed an Indian pony, one belonging to one of the four, and started for the rocks. But a warrior ran close by so I got in a lucky shot," he said simply. "I went back a ways and waited for Nino. When he charged the rocks and found nothing I figured something was wrong. I took a look inside, searching for Wallace," he added.

"He shot them both, Charley," she said in a tight, level voice. "He did it to force me to come with him or stay there and burn."

"So I figured," he answered and bent over her with the knife. He cut her bonds and she got slowly to her feet, a little stiff.

"Charley," she asked him, her eyes searching his face. "What—what happened to poor One-Card?"

"One of the Indians shot him when Nino came," he said simply.

She thought, looking at his lean, unshaved face, I think you're lying, but if you are I'm glad you didn't tell me.

He went over and rolled Nino over on his back. Wallace said from where he was still trussed up, "I'm glad you killed that murdering devil."

"All depends upon how you look upon killing a man," Cogin grunted. "And I didn't kill him. I put one through his shoulder to knock him down and out. I knew his men would run for it. I'm taking him back alive."

DAWN broke over the little camp, if such it could be called. It found Nino, bandaged from strips torn from the woman's underskirt, lying beside

the fire. He was conscious now, and you could see in his eyes the dregs of defeat, the shame, the undying humiliation at what his hated enemy had done to him. He had been glad when the White Eyes had taken Poco away and thus reopened Nino's path to Keneta's jacal with his horses. And *now*!

He closed his eyes to shut out the sight of him, to send out pleading thought spirits at his terrible failure.

"What are you going to do with me, Charley?" Wallace asked, only his hands tied back of him now. "You trailed me a good many hundred miles to kill me. What's it going to be—murder while I'm tied or an even break?"

Cogin shook his head. "Neither one, Wallace. You and I think a little different along those lines. You'll end up in Kansas in front of a jury. You'll hang."

"And your friend the Apache?" sneered the murderer.

"He won't be much good for raiding any more after what that slug did to his shoulder bones. I'm going to use him to try to make peace with the bigger fellows."

He turned and went back to the fire and the eyes of the woman followed him. . . .

Some three weeks later Cogin and the woman known as Gert rode slowly up the creek toward the little settlement. It was late afternoon and comparatively cool beneath the cottonwoods. The birds were chirping and carrying on their mock battles and there was a buzzard or two still sailing around.

Cogin had met a patrol of soldiers two days before and had turned over his two prisoners to the army, Wallace to be sent back to Kansas under guard to stand trial for the murder of Cogin's sister. If a death verdict failed there the officer had agreed to see that he would be held for the murder of the cashiers of the two banks he had robbed. Nino had promised Cogin that the money would be returned.

There had been silence between him

and the woman for quite some time now. During the time they had stayed at a big hacienda to rest up and let Nino recover somewhat, his manner toward her had not changed. Now she shot him a sidewise glance, moving up beside him. The packhorse they had secured in Mexico plodded along on its lead rope.

"My place is just up beyond that next big group of trees and not far from the settlement," she said. "If you'd care to stop off long enough I'll cook you a good supper. I owe you that much for changing a few things in my life."

He said, "Are you going back to the pack-train work?"

She shook her head. "I'm going back to Texas. I can get enough for my mules and equipment, and I've a little hidden at the cabin there. Hornbuckle was right about staying too long in one place and then it being too late to make a fresh start. I'm making that fresh start."

They came to the trees and he saw a comfortable adobe cabin with corrals and sheds out back. The front door was open, the corrals empty. It had an air of desertion about it.

"That's strange," she said. "I told those packers to stay here until I got back."

They loped up to the place and swung down and went inside. It was in shambles, the furniture smashed, the kitchen wrecked. A big wood rat ran half way across the floor, paused to eye them beadily, and then scurried away.

"At a first-hand guess," he said wryly but smiling a little, "I'd say that your boys decided to go into business for themselves. They took the whole outfit and burned the breeze for Mexico."

SHE surprised him by smiling right back. "That saves me a lot of time and bother, Charley. Wait until I get a few handfuls of money I have hidden and I'll buy your supper instead of cooking it."

He went out and mounted and presently she reappeared and swung up.

They jogged on up the broad trail for about two hundred yards and then pulled up sharply and stared down. Off to one side of the trail were five fresh mounds of earth. A few feet away was a giant cottonwood with big spreading limbs. Both looked up instinctively.

"Come on!" she cried out. "There's something wrong around here!"

They drove forward at a gallop, the pack horse thumping along behind, and in a matter of minutes the settlement came into view. It was deserted, not a soul in sight. Cogin swung down before the place where the Mexican woman had served him the food. It was as though she had simply walked out and left everything. The cow and calf were together in the shade of a cottonwood and there wasn't a chicken in sight. Coyotes.

"She wanted to go back to Mexico," Cogin told the woman. "It looks like the packers took her back."

She turned from a few feet away and beckoned to him. He strode over and peered inside one of the rooms where two of the outlaws had lived. The place was pock marked by bullet holes and on one spot on the dirt floor there was a dried crust of what had been crimson.

It was the same in the other places. Hornbuckle's bar was in shambles.

He said quietly, "Posse. Looks like they barreled in here after some badly wanted men and decided to clean out the whole place. Well, they did a good job."

"Yes, Charley, they did a good job," she said slowly. "One that was long overdue. And if Limpy and One-Card and Bart and Horn—and Gert the smuggler had been here instead of in Mexico—" She left the rest of it unsaid.

He leaned his back against an adobe

wall with the fresh pock marks in it and rolled a cigarette. He lighted it and let the match drop between his spurred boots and from long habit in the grassy range country where fires can prove disastrous, he rubbed it out with his boot. The spur rattled oddly.

Finally he said, "Well, I guess I'd better be getting along. I'm due at the fort this week to see Nino and the officers. I'll have to tell old Tacana that I killed his brother, but I don't think the wrinkled old devil will mind a great deal."

She laughed, a little strangely. "Yes, it's funny how things work out. We went after 'bounty money' and only one of us got back alive. And if we had all remained here things probably would have come out the same way. One-Card would have said it was in the cards. I guess so. If the Apaches hadn't got you, you'd have been just like other people instead of what you are. And if I hadn't met a very right man in some ways but a very wrong man in a lot of other ways, we wouldn't be two of a kind."

"I hadn't thought about it that way," he said thoughtfully. "Not until now. Do you reckon, Gert—"

"Yes," she said and stepped over and despite her tallness she had to look up at him. "Yes, I reckon, Charley. Two of an odd kind might make one of the right kind."

"I was sort of thinking the same thing," he answered and felt some kind of an odd feeling go through him. He dropped the cigarette. "We'll talk it over on the way to the fort. Well, we'd better get going. Nino will be waiting. He's kind of anxious for me to see what Keneta and those three little Apaches look like."

Featured in the Next Issue

HELLGATE CANYON

A Lusty Novel of the Brawling West by **FRED DELANO**

COW-COUNTRY QUIZ

①

HOW DID WES HARDIN BLUFF WILD BILL HICKOK WHEN HICKOK HAD THE DROP ON HIM?



②

IN A STEEPLECHASE RACE BETWEEN A COWBOY AND A CAVALRYMAN, WHO WOULD BE MOST LIKELY TO WIN?



③

IN DRIVING CATTLE OR HORSES THROUGH DESERT COUNTRY, HOW OFTEN WOULD THE MEN HAVE TO FIGURE ON WATERING THEIR ANIMALS?



④ WHAT WAS A LONG HORSE?

⑤

WHAT SIMPLE PSYCHOLOGICAL FACT HELPED MANY OLD TIME SHERIFFS OUTGUESS KILLERS WHOM THEY WERE TRAILING?

The Answers are on Page 145—if you MUST look!

*Boo Boo advances
bravely toward the
man in the mask*



*As far as Aunt Sophia is
concerned, it's up to Sheriff
Boo Boo Bounce to show her he's a——*

Ball of Fire, and

HAVING et breakfast, I am about to depart when my wife says unexpected, "Hopewell, this being the first of the month, here is your two dollars allowance out of your check, plus eighteen to pay the grocery bill. And should you forget to pay the grocery bill—"

She snaps her fingers no little poppy, making me realize what will happen should I fail to hand the eighteen smackeroots to Nail-head Nutter.

"My dear," I say hurt, "I, the deputy sheriff of Coyote County, U.S.A., am a man who can be trusted to—"

"Phooey!" she says. "You cannot be trusted. Furthermore—"

I wait to hear no more but hurry outside, not being one to argue with a wife such as mine.

Walking down the one street of Polecat, I find it no little pleasant to feel the bulge of twenty ringers in my pocket and pass up Nail-head's store, thinking I will pay him later.

Coming to the post office, I step in for the mail.

"Hopewell," Mailman Moffett says, "here is the sweetest smelling letter I have received in Polecat for many a day. It is hard to believe that a fat, lazy no-good like Boo Boo Bounce would have a lady friend who—"

"Leave us have the letter," I say icy, not liking the way he is talking about the sheriff of Coyote County, "and not shoot off our mouth about the people's choice and his lady friends."

I take the letter and depart huffy. Out of sight of Mailman, I take a look and find it a very fussy lavender with the postmark blurred unreadable and a smell I would not care to have my wife catch

me having around and about. Somewhat excited, I rush into the jail office.

BOO BOO is setting in his easy chair, snoring gentle. He opens one eye and give his fat thumbs a irritated twiddle.

"Deputy, why is it you must always come in whilst I am in the arms of Morpheus and—"

"Boo Boo," I interrupt, "I have—"

"Silence and leave me finish," he says. "Here I am, setting content, dreaming how all is well, it being the day after payday with my debts paid and six ringers left over and—"

"I have twenty dollars," I say. "My wife—"

"I am still talking, deputy. As I was saying, six ringers left over and not a worry worth mentioning, except a rumor of Three-finger Floyd being about, when in you come, slammeddybang and—what is that I smell, Hopewell?"

"A letter," I answer and hand it to him. "Boo Boo, I didn't know you had a lady friend."

"Deputy," he says, sighing sad, "there is but one person in the wide world who writes me sweet smelling lavender letters. My Aunt Sophia Bounce of Boston. Leave me add that she is old and rich, and I, being her favorite nephew, hope to be remembered handsomely in her will."

Sighing again, he opens the envelope and digs out a sheet of paper.

"Hopewell, I cannot understand how such a ole lady as she can stay alive. She—oh, oh!"

One look at him, and I realize he has received a shock. "Boo Boo," I cry in alarm, "tell me the worst!"

No Mistake by Ben Frank

"Aunt Sophia," he gurgles faint, "is on her way to California and will stop off at Polecat to pay me a short visit."

"That is nice," I say agreeable.

But Boo Boo is up and waddling about the office with a white face very startling to behold, it usually being a brick red.

"Aunt Sophia Bounce," he says hoarse, "is a go-getter with more vim and vinegar than a barrel of soda water. Being thusly, she expects others to be likewise and has no use for such as I who is somewhat inclined to take life as it comes."

"But," I say puzzled, "if that is the case—"

"Hopewell, I must confess I have deceived dear Aunt Sophia in my letters to her. In short, I have led her to believe I am also a go-getter, brimful of ambition and industry."

"She thinks I am a six-gun wizzard who ain't afraid of nothing. I have casually mentioned that I am the most important Polecatter in Polecat. To get down to brass tacks, Aunt Sophia is likely to be utmostly disappointed in her favorite nephew."

"That," I say, "is a pity, Boo Boo, but it merely goes to show that honesty is the best policy."

"Deputy," he says harsh. "that is neither here nor yon, and no mistake! The point is, from the time Aunt Sophia steps off the train tomorrow noon until she steps back on tomorrow evening, she must believe her nephew, I, Boo Boo Bounce, is a ball of fire very much on the beam. Hopewell, get busy and think how not to disappoint my dear aunt!"

I set down and take off my hat to think. "Boo Boo," I say presently, "there is one way, but I doubt if six dollars is enough money to make it work."

"Hopewell," he says happy, "we will add yore twenty to my six and thusly have—"

"Oh, no!" I say quick. "Eighteen is for groceries, and—"

"Deputy," he interrupts, "leave me

remind you, it is I who made you what you are. Also, as soon as Aunt Sophia passes to her reward, I will repay you back with interest. In short, chip in with yore dinero, or put on yore hat and depart forever! What have yuh thunk up?"

There is nothing to do but tell him how we can keep Aunt Sophia undisappointed for a few dollars. No sooner do I finish than he leaps to his feet and slaps his hat over his bald head.

"Look at me, Hopewell!" he cries, tapping himself on the chest vigorous. "A ball of fire, and no mistake! Hand me yore twenty smackeroos, and leave us get into action."

I can only obey, wishing to myself I was not so good a thinker-upper for such a big ball of fire as Boo Boo Bounce.

FIRST, we cross the street to the Polecat Hotel where at Latch-string Lacy is setting at his desk, cleaning his nails.

"Latch-string," Boo Boo says forceful, "kindly trot out yore best room for my Aunt Sophia Bounce of Boston to tidy up in tomorrow. And leave us have no dust or empty bottles stashed about, my dear aunt being tee-totally dry and fussy."

"Three dollars in advance," Latch-string says cheerful.

Without a murmur, Boo Boo forks over three ringers. We rush to the Emporium and find Jigger-joe Jirous behind the bar, shining glasses, and Forty-rod Frye leaning on a stool, blinking wistful at numerous bottles here and yon.

"Gents," Forty-rod says, smiling hopeful, "I would not object to yuh buyin' me a small nip of—"

Boo Boo interrupts to tell of his Aunt Sophia's visit. "Friend Forty-rod," he says, "I will give yuh two smackeroos should you meet us on the street tomorrow and promise never to touch another drop."

Forty-rod agrees once he understands he does not have to keep his promise, and Boo Boo hands him two of our dollars.

"Jigger-joe," Boo Boo says, "as we wander by tomorrow, will you kindly step to the door and permit me to bawl yuh out no little severe, thus making a impression on my dear aunt?"

"Why, yes," Jigger-joe agrees. "For five dollars you can call me a dirty, low-down—"

"Aunt Sophia would object to any strong language," Boo Boo says shuddery, "but here is yore five smackeroos."

We hasten to Stinky Joe's cafe, which is hardly no place to eat if you can help it and find Stinky is feeding Soup Shannon's trailing hound a bone under the counter.

"Stinky," Boo Boo says businesslike, "I wish to reserve a table for three tomorrow noon and will pay cash in advance should you promise to chase out all flies beforehand, wear a clean apron and guarantee there will be no hairs in the soup."

"Boo Boo," Stinky says, "that kind of service will cost yuh three bucks, and not a cent less."

Boo Boo yells he is being robbed a good dollar and a half, but nonetheless, hands over the money.

Leaving the restaurant, we hustle to the feed store, where at we see No-work Norton setting in the shade. Boo Boo explains about Aunt Sophia.

"She will wish to see the scenery," Boo Boo says, "so Hopewell and I will taker her to the Squaw Hills to look. For two dollars, all you have to do is tie a handkerchief over yore face, pretend you are a desperado and let me arrest yuh."

"For two ringers," No-work says, smiling happy, "I will do this job up brown, providing yuh let me sleep all night in the jail and give me my breakfast."

They shake hands on the deal, and Boo Boo and I head on toward the mayor's office. Who should we see approaching, grinning evil, but old man Bundy, editor of *The Polecat News* and a gent who is forever finding fault with Boo Boo and I.

"Deputy," Boo Boo says soto voice, "leave us not speak to yon skunk. Should he learn about Aunt Sophia's visit, nothing would make him happier than to defame my character before her."

But Bundy is not one to be passed up easy. He stops direct before us and hold's up a bony, ink-stained hand.

"Ah, ha!" he says sneerful. "The lawmen of Coyote County."

"Kindly step to one side," Boo Boo says frigid, "for my deputy and I are no little busy."

BUNDY laughs nasty. "Boo Boo, the only time you are busy is at mealtime. How you two lame-brains can fool the voters is more'n I can—"

"Friend Bundy," Boo Boo says dignified, "leave me remind you that I, Boo Boo Bounce, always gets his man."

"Poppy-cock!" Bundy snorts. "You ain't got Three-finger Floyd yet. Incidental, don't miss reading tomorrow's *Polecat News*. In it I am printing a editorial which tells the truth about you from A to Z."

Chuckling wicked, he hastens on along the street, leaving Boo Boo pale and trembling.

"Hopewell," he says husky, "Aunt Sophia reads all the newspapers. Think of something to stop Bundy."

But before I can think of anything, we have arrived at the mayor's office, where at we find him setting with his feet on his desk, twirling his red mustache and talking to Judge Jackson, both of whom are tied close to us politically.

"Greetings, gents," Mayor Mince-meat Malone says. "Set and take a load off yore feet, Boo Boo. You also, Hopewell."

"Yes, indeed," Judge Jackson says, tapping his gold-headed cane friendly on the floor. "We was discussing you, Boo Boo, and how you are somewhat in arrears, kicking in yore party dues."

"Leave us hear how much I am in arrears," Boo Boo says, setting down careful to see if the chair will hold him.

Mince-meat gives his mustache a twirl. "How much money have yuh got, Boo Boo?"

"Five dollars, maybe," Boo Boo says cautious.

"Make it ten," Judge Jackson says hopeful.

Boo Boo sighs deep and tells them about Aunt Sophia. "Should you gents meet the train and welcome my dear aunt to Polecat," he adds, "I will kick in ten to the party."

They agree to do his wish, and Boo Boo hands over ten very lovely dollars. Next we go to the livery barn and pay a dollar in advance for a team and a buckboard.

Outside, I say worried, "Boo Boo, we are now flat busted and as yet have made no arrangements for a Indian raid as planned. Also, when my wife learns I have not paid the grocery bill—"

"Leave us not worry about the inconsequential," he says. "Leave us get down to business and figure how we can get ole Chief Eagle Beak and his braves to make a raid. Also, how we can keep Bundy from printing the truth about me in his paper."

He clutches my shirt front and gives me a slight shake.

"Deputy, it occurs to me that you are not putting forth all effort. Leave us cudgel yore brains, or I will find a better man to fill yore shoes, and no mistake!"

We step into the jail office, me indeed worried and then some, for the way Boo Boo's three chins are quivering violent tells me he is not fooling.

Presently I say, "We could ride out to Pop Pully's and procure a jug of his homebrew. This we could give to Eagle Beak, thusly bribing him to make a fake raid on you and I and Aunt Sophia Bounce."

"Fine," Boo Boo says sarcastic, "but we have no money to pay Pop for his homemade brew."

"Pop is somewhat trusting."

"But how about Bundy and his newspaper?"

"Very simple," I say confident. "In the middle of tonight, you sneak over to the newspaper office and upset his barrel of ink. Without ink, he can hardly print—"

"Not I, Hopewell," Boo Boo says hasty. "In the first place, a man of my size is hardly built for sneaking about. In the second place, once I go to sleep, I never wake up till morning and then I find it somewhat difficult to—Oh, oh! I have a better idea. You, Deputy, will upset the ink."

"But," I say, no little perturbed, "being married and—"

"Nonetheless, it is up to you. Leave me add, without you, my thinker-upper and true friend, I would be utmosty helpless. Someday I am going to see that you get a raise, so smile pleasant, Hopewell."

THIS I attempt but find it difficult of accomplishment.

We go to the barn behind the jail, saddle our mounts, and I assist Boo Boo aboard. Presently we are out of town and riding brisk toward Pop Pully's, who traps in winter, raises a patch of corn in summer and makes a very potent drink the year around for a few-odd customers with strong stomachs.

Arriving, we dismount and bang noisy on the door of Pop's shack, him being deafer than a dead mule.

There is no answer, so Boo Boo yells, "Hey, Pop!"

There still is no answer, so we wander inside and find that Pop is not to home, but has left numerous jugs of fire-water setting about handy.

Boo Boo picks up the biggest jug and says, "Suppose Pop figures somebody has stole this and raises a row?"

"Leave us write a note explaining we have not stole it but will pay him in the future," I suggest.

This we do and then ride on to where Eagle Beak lives.

We find him setting in the shade, doing nothing. Seeing us, he looks for a place to hide. Finding none close at

hand, he smiles innocent and says, "Eagle Beak not guilty, him having not stole no dogs or hosses."

"We have not come to arrest yuh, my friend," Boo Boo says.

He takes the cork from the jug and lets Eagle Beak have a whiff. Then he explains about Aunt Sophia and that he wishes to fight off a Indian attack for her benefit.

Eagle Beak shakes his head unhappy. "No wish to dodgeum bullets. Might ziggum when oughta zagum."

"I forgot to mention," Boo Boo says, "that Hopewell is going to remove all bullets from my shells so I'll be shooting harmless."

"Will do um," Eagle Beak says, reaching for the jug.

Boo Boo jerks it away. "Yuh'll get this in the raid," he says firm, "and not one second before."

"Boo Boo," I ask after we have rid away, "how come you didn't give Pop's poison to Eagle Beak?"

He smiles superior and says, "Give it to him now, he would consume same and forget his promise. But if he has to make the raid first, he won't forget, and no mistake."

I cannot help but admire how wise Boo Boo is and say so.

"Thank you, deputy," he says modest. "Now, leave us return to Polecat and continue to be balls of fire burning very bright."

Back in the jail office, I spend the rest of the day removing the bullets from Boo Boo's .45 cartridges, while he watches close.

"I cannot understand why I never thunk of removing the bullets before, thus making my trusty six more safer to handle," he says, twiddling his thumbs content. "Hopewell, now that all is hunky-dory for Aunt Sophia's brief sojourn in our city, I can't hardly wait for her arrival."

But I am filled with worry, for ahead lies two very high hurdles to be leaped, namely: keeping my wife from discovering I have not paid the grocery bill and

upsetting Bundy's ink.

However, my worries are needless, for upon arriving home, I find my wife all atwitter and powdering her nose.

"What do you know, Hopewell!" she cries joyful. "Mrs. Van Uplift has invited me to a meeting of the Polecat Cultural Society. No doubt, they will ask me to become a member."

NOT one word does she say about the grocery bill. Also, her being gone to the meeting gives me a chance to slip out of the house after dark and upset the ink, which I do, and is no trouble at all, for Bundy has left a back window open and the barrel handy. In less than ten minutes, the job is done, and I am home safe and sound.

The next morning, the moment I step into the jail office, I know Boo Boo is a hotter ball of fire than ever, for he is sweeping the floor vigorous.

"Boo Boo," I exclaim astounded, "have you gone loco?"

"Deputy," he says puffy, "in a few hours, dear Aunt Sophia will arrive and may wish to inspect my jail. It will not take her long to see that her nephew is one who abhors dirt and disorder. Kindly grab yon pail of water and start washing the windows."

"But, Boo Boo," I say fearful, "what will the Polecatters think should they notice bright and shiny jail windows?"

"What Aunt Sophia thinks is what counts," he says.

When I have finished the last window, he says, "Deputy, rush down to the store and buy a can of floor wax and let no grass grow underfoot."

This I do, returning with the can of wax and unscrewing the cap.

"I bet Nail-head has had this in his store for twenty years," I murmur. "The hole is plugged up with dry wax."

"Unplug it," Boo Boo says impatient, "and get busy."

"I don't have nothing to unplug it with," I say.

"Hopewell," he says irritated and grabbing the can from me, "sometimes

you are more helpless than a baby. I'll unplug—"

He rams a finger into the hole in the can, and of a sudden his face pales, while his three chins quiver agitated.

"Finger stuck," he mumbles. "Give a tug, Hopewell."

I grab the can and pull.

"Wow!" he hollers. "Don't pull off my finger."

WE WORK at getting his finger out of the spout, but nothing happens, except it sticks tighter than previous.

"Hopewell," he pants desperate, "this is a pretty howdy-do, my trigger finger stuck in a can with Aunt Sophia due any minute. Think of something quick."

"We could get Bing-bong Beamer, the blacksmith, to chisel the can off, maybe."

He shudders horrified. "That might hurt no little. Besides there is no time to get Bing-bong into action. Think further."

"Leave us wrap your hand up in a bandage and tell Aunt Sophia you have hurt it," I say. "After she has gone, we can figure how to get you loose from the can."

"Hopewell," he says, smiling sudden, "you are a genius, and no mistake! Also, I will prove to Aunt Sophia that with my right arm in a sling, I can conquer Injuns and robbers."

I get a sheet off a cot, tear it into strips and soon have Boo Boo's hand, can and all, wrapped up very professional. Then I make a sling, which he puts over his head and sticks the arm into. Just as we finish, we hear the noon passenger whistle. Grabbing our hats, we make a rush for the depot, arriving simultaneous with the train.

Aunt Sophia is tall and skinny with a long nose and a sour face and a glass on a black stick she holds up to one eye and looks up over somewhat suspicious and distasteful. Then she comes down the steps very chipper for such an old lady in a black dress, her diamond earrings all aglitter.

"Welcome, Aunt Sophia!" Boo Boo cries hearty.

She studies him through her glass and frowns severe.

"Dear boy, hello," she says in a slight basso voice. "Hum, I see you have picked up fifty pounds and another chin since we last met."

This remark flusters Boo Boo no little, so I say helpful, "Hard work agrees utmost with Boo Boo."

She turns her glass on me and wrinkles her nose sniffy. "What have we here, dear boy?" she says. "A trusty?"

"He is my deputy," Boo Boo says.

"Deputy?" she says. "I thought you enforced the law single-handed."

"I do," Boo Boo says quick. "Hopewell merely—"

"Dear boy," she says sudden, "what is wrong with your arm?"

Boo Boo swallows audible, and I say, "Boo Boo had a tussle with a crooked gambler and was forced to strike him."

"Yes, indeed," Boo Boo says. "Yuh've no idea how hard some gamblers' heads is, Aunt Sophia."

At that moment, Mayor Mince-meat Malone and Judge Jackson step forward and make a great to-do over Boo Boo and his Aunt Sophia. She is no little impressed and gives one and all a look of approval.

We hustle her to the hotel for her to tidy up, and it is plain to see she is pleased as anything at all this thoughtfulness.

"Hopewell," Boo Boo whispers happy, "everything is rosy, thanks to you. Never again will I call you a idiot."

Presently we take Aunt Sophia to Stinky Joe's place, and there he is with a clean apron on and not a fly in sight or no hairs nor nothing strange and startling in the soup. Watching Aunt Sophia eat, I have a feeling she will live a good fifty years yet, which is a long time not to pay Nail-head Nutter the grocery bill.

After we are through eating, we go to the jail.

"Dear boy," she says, "I am proud of you and your fine, clean jail."

"Thank you, auntie," Boo Boo says. "Would you care to see some of our lovely scenery? If so, I will get my team and buckboard to show you about in."

"How delightful," she says, beaming.

While we are on our way to the livery stable, along comes Forty-rod Frye, stumbling over his own feet.

"Sir," Boo Boo says reproachful, "I see you have been indulging again. Shame on you! Now, promise me sincere you will never, never touch another drop."

"Sheriff," Forty-rod says, lifting his right hand, "I promise I will never taste another drop, no matter what."

"Poor man," Aunt Sophia says sympathetic, "you look like you are penniless. Here is five dollars for you. Go your way and sin no more."

Forty-rod likes to fall in a dead faint. "Thank yuh, madam," he gurgles. "Leave me add you have a fine nephew, which is no more'n a fine lady such as you deserve."

He hurries away, leaving Boo Boo and I no little uneasy, for five ringers is too much money for Forty-rod to have all at one time.

We come to Jigger Joe's Emporium, and he is standing in the doorway. Boo Boo halts and points a steady finger at him.

"Jigger Joe," he says harsh, "you and yore establishment are a disgrace to our lovely city, and no mistake! If you sell liquor to Forty-rod Frye again, I will padlock yore place up tighter'n a E fiddle string!"

Jigger Joe mops his brow with a trembling hand. "Sheriff," he says hoarse, "cross my heart, I will obey yore every wish."

We go on, and Aunt Sophia pats Boo Boo's good arm. "Dear boy," she says, her diamond earrings glittering very happy, "you are everything I hoped you would be, and then some."

At that moment, we meet old man Bundy, who is stamping his feet vio-

lent and scowling fierce.

"Boo Boo," he yells, "some skunk upset my barrel of ink last night. A man cannot print a paper without ink, and I—"

"Mr. Bundy," Boo Boo cuts in icy, "kindly watch yore language in the presence of a lady. Even with my right arm in a sling, I have a good mind to teach you better manners."

"Now, looky," Bundy sputters, "you can't—"

"Good-day, Mr. Bundy. Come, Aunt Sophia."

We leave Bundy growling to himself something about more than one way to skin a cat, which I do not like the sound of.

We are well into the country, riding along bouncy in the buckboard through the Squaw Hills, when Aunt Sophia notices the jug under the seat.

"Boo Boo," she says, putting the glass to her eye, "I do not like to have jugs in my company, for they were the downfall of your Uncle Andover Bounce."

"Madam," I say, slapping the horses into a brisk trot, "in the great West, it being far from one water hole to the next, a jug of water is utmostly necessary to have along."

"Exactly," Boo Boo says, looking relieved.

"In that case, dear boy," she says, "you may keep the jug." Then she looks about at the hills and timber and shudders slight. "This is indeed a lonely spot. Suppose we are attacked by savages or robbers, you with one arm in a sling."

BOO BOO draws his six with his left hand. "Aunt Sophia, I am as good shooting a gun with one hand as the other. Leave the savages come, and see who cares!"

No sooner does he say this than Eagle Beak and a half-dozen braves leap from the bushes and begin to yell bloody murder. "Get Aunt Sophia safe behind a tree," Boo Boo says calm, "and leave the rest to me."

I do so, and Boo Boo begins to shoot blanks right and left and also shoving the jug toward Eagle Beak with his feet. Soon the raid is over, and we are on our way again.

"The varmints stole our jug of water," Boo Boo says, "but they paid dearly with their blood."

Presently we turn a corner, and there is No-work Norton with a handkerchief tied over his face, waving a shotgun around.

"This is a holdup," he yells, "and I won't take no for an answer!"

"Me, oh my!" Aunt Sophia wails. "My diamond earrings!"

"Keep calm, everybody," Boo Boo says. "Hold the hosses steady, Hope-well, whilst I climb to the ground. Here, hold my gun. I will fix this rascal with one bare hand."

He climbs down and advances steady toward No-work.

"Put down yore gun instantaneous, desperado!" he says gritty.

No-work drops his gun and says shaky, "Sheriff, if I had knowed it was you, I would not have tried to rob yuh."

"Climb into the back of my buckboard and set down," Boo Boo commands harsh. "It's jail for you, my man."

All the way back to Polecat, Aunt Sophia cannot get over telling Boo Boo what a fine brave nephew he is. All the time, Boo Boo keeps saying, "'Twaren't

nothing, Aunt Sophia." But she does not believe him.

"Boo Boo," I remark, "is a ball of fire."

"A chip off the Bounce block," she says proud.

Everything, I see, is indeed very fine for Boo Boo, except it will be a long time before Aunt Sophia passes to her reward.

The moment we arrive in Polecat, there is the mayor and the judge standing on the street. They wave to us very friendly and come to where we have climbed from the buckboard.

"Gentlemen," Aunt Sophia says, "you are indeed fortunate to have my dear nephew for sheriff. He has just—"

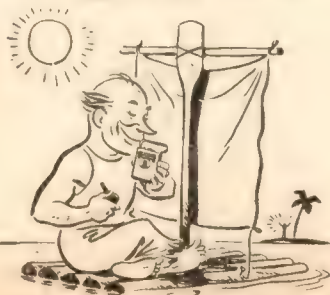
But she does not finish, for at that moment Forty-rod Frye comes staggering up very red-nosed and holding a half-empty bottle. He hands two dollars to Boo Boo with a shaky hand and says, "I spent the five ringers yore dear aunt give me for this lovely bottle and feel I should return the two yuh paid me to promise not to touch another drop."

This is when Jigger Joe Jirous rushes up and grabs No-work by the collar and hauls him out of the buckboard.

"There yuh are, yuh loafer!" he says angry. "I been lookin' all over town for yuh to sweep out the Emporium, but you have been ridin' around with—"

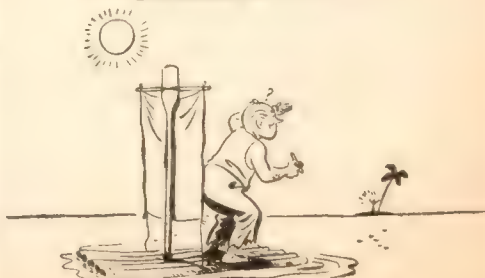
THE ADVENTURES OF

IT SMELLS GRAND



AROMA SWEET AS ANY ROSE—

IT PACKS RIGHT



PACKS TO PLEASE YOU—
GOODNESS KNOWS!

He stops talking sudden, but it is too late, for Aunt Sophia's eyes are bugging no little.

"So he ain't a outlaw," she says gurgly.

"Lady," Jigger Joe says regretful, "No-work Norton ain't no more a outlaw than you. Are yuh, No-work?"

NO-WORK shakes his head and hands Boo Boo two dollars. "Sorry, Boo Boo," he mumbles, "but looks like I've spoiled things for yuh; so here is the money yuh paid me to hold yuh up."

"I too am sorry, Boo Boo," Jigger Joe says, digging out a five spot and handing it to Boo Boo.

"Boo Boo," Aunt Sophia screams, "kindly explain what—"

"Boo Boo, I demand justice!" a voice shouts, and there is Shoe-on Sorby, a homesteader near Skunk Creek, looking mad. "Eagle Beak and his braves got hold of a jug of moonshine, drunk themselves silly and had a war dance right in the middle of my potato patch."

"Hey, Boo Boo," a second voice says, and we turn to see Pop Pully hobbling up, "I got yore note about takin' that jugful and have come for my money."

"Sheriff," Judge Jackson says aghast, "what is this about you giving fire-water to the Injuns?"

That is when I feel a cold nose against my hand, and looking down, see Soup

Shannon's trailing hound eying me accusing. Close behind him is Soup and old man Bundy, eyes aglitter.

"Just as I suspected," Bundy says unpleasant. "Boo Boo had Hopewell upset my ink so I could not print in the paper what a no-good scoundrel he is. Thank you, Soup, for yore hound dog."

"Boo Boo," Mayor Mince-meat Malone yells, "are yuh guilty?"

Boo Boo says nothing, but looks no less guilty than a boy caught smoking behind the barn.

"Faker!" Aunt Sophia says basso, pointing a bony finger at Boo Boo. "And to think I was about to put you in my will."

Of a sudden, Boo Boo turns on me wrathful. "Hopewell, you idiot! All this is yore fault, and yuh're fired!"

"Greetings, one and all," a smooth voice says.

Turning, we see a tall, flat-nosed gent holding a gun with a hand minus two fingers, and it is plain to all present that here is Three-finger Floyd in our midst.

"It is seldom I find so many people gathered together," he goes on smooth, "so busy fussing they do not see me ride into town. Kindly raise all hands skyward."

One look into Three-finger's cold eyes, and we do so, even Boo Boo, who forgets he had a arm in a sling. And what

[Turn page]

UNCLE WALTER

IT SMOKES SWEET



WITH EVERY PUFF
YOUR PLEASURE GROWS!

with Sir Walter Raleigh!

IT CAN'T BITE!

SIR WALTER RALEIGH'S BLEND OF CHOICE KENTUCKY BURLEYS IS EXTRA-AGED TO GUARD AGAINST TONGUE BITE, AND SIR WALTER RALEIGH NEVER LEAVES A SOGGY HEEL IN YOUR PIPE. STAYS LIT TO THE LAST PUFF.



*It costs
no more
to get
the Best!*

should happen, but the bandage comes off, exposing his finger caught in the wax can. But no one notices this, for Three-finger is the center of attention, and then some.

The outlaw steps up to Boo Boo and takes Boo Boo's six. Smiling sneery, he puts his own gun away.

"Allus wanted to pull a holdup with a sheriff's gun," he says, taking off his sombrero. "Folks, shell out all valuables and deposit same in my hat, and no funny business!"

The mayor, the judge and old Bundy drop their watches and pocketbooks into the hat. Aunt Sophia unscrews her diamond earrings and does likewise. I have no money and say so.

"Sheriff," Three-finger says, "dig out yore dinero."

Boo Boo forgets he has a can on his finger and tries to get his hand in his pocket, but this he cannot do.

"Let me help yuh," Three-finger says exasperated. He pushes the six against Boo Boo's oversized middle and starts to slide a hand into Boo Boo's pocket. "One move, sheriff," he grates, "and I'll let yuh have it!"

"Boo Boo," I say sudden, "no bullets!"

BOO BOO blinks rapid and swings the can at Three-finger's head. There follows a hollow plunk and a shot, but Boo Boo is undamaged and the desperado falls to the ground unconscious, while the can comes from Boo Boo's finger and gurgles pleasant in the dust.

There follows a stunned silence with all eyes on Boo Boo, who picks up the hat and begins to pass out the loot mechanical.

"Boo Boo," I say, thinking fast, "leave me congratulate you on your remarkable idea of carrying a can of wax wrapped up like a sore hand to capture Three-finger with."

"Yuh mean," Judge Jackson croaks, "that Boo Boo planned all this to capture that outlaw?"

"Yes, indeed," I say. "Even to loading his gun with blank cartridges. Aunt Sophia's visit almost threw a monkey-wrench into his careful laid plans, but our sheriff got his man."

Aunt Sophia looks from her diamond earrings to Boo Boo somewhat uncertain. "Dear boy," she says husky.

Boo Boo finds his voice. "Dear Aunt, I am utmostly sorry I had to do things as they was did, but being a true-blue lawman, there was nothing else for me to do but carry out my careful laid plans to capture Three-finger."

"Hurrah for Boo Boo!" Mince-meat says. "And leave us take up a collection to show our appreciation of his fine work."

"Poppy-cock!" Bundy says. "Boo Boo is plenty dumb."

• "Sir," Aunt Sophia says furious, "how dare you talk about my nephew thusly!" Then she gives Boo Boo a fond look through her glass. "Dear boy, you have the old Bounce spirit, and no mistake!"

It is not until after the train and Aunt Sophia Bounce is gone that Boo Boo and I have a chance to set down and relax.

"Deputy," he says, handing me the roll of bills give him in appreciation of his bravery, "go pay yore grocery bill and keep the change." Then sighing deep, "If I had of knowed how healthy Aunt Sophia is, I doubt if I would have been such a ball of fire. But that is life, Hopewell, so kindly run along and leave me alone to recuperate."

This I do, paying Nail-head Nutter his eighteen smackeroots and having nine left over, which is why it is a no little pleasure to work for such a fine gent as Boo Boo Bounce, even when he is a ball of fire, and no mistake!

COMING NEXT ISSUE

SHOESTRING SHOWDOWN, An Action Novelet by James D. Lucey

A FACT
STORY



Rustling

By JOE E. DASH

The Art of Widelooing Is as Old as Sin!

CATTLE RUSTLING is centuries old; no doubt it began with the taming of the ox, the first animal that was domesticated by man.

The first cattle rustlers on the North American continent were pirates of the Spanish Main, and the aborigines of the land. Cattle of all breeds were brought into the New World from Spain, and when the rustling Spaniards settled in the West India Islands, in the Floridas, and had conquered Mexico about 400 years ago, cattle ranches began to take form. Gradually cattle herds from the West India Islands were taken to the Floridas and into the Mississippi Valley, and, also from Mexico to Tejas—the former province now Texas.

For about two centuries, and after the alleged discovery of the West India Is-

lands, these places became resorts for pirates of the Spanish Main, and there rose an industrious class called "boucaniers," who supplied the pirate vessels with beef. Some of these so-called boucaniers' cattle ranchers, had, after a time, quit the pirate business for the safer work of raising stock. Little ranches were started near the coast line where it was somewhat convenient to passing ships. Finally, these cattle ranches found it cheaper to steal cattle than to raise them. Consequently some of the ranch owners raided neighboring ranches and became what we now call "rustlers."

Cattle rustling began in the North American colonies about the same time that it did in the West India Islands and in the Floridas. When the Dutch colo-

nists settled in New York, and the English settled in Virginia, cattle were brought over from England. But the Indians, resenting the influx of the white settlers, drove their cattle away and plundered and slew the inhabitants. In these early days whole settlements were devastated of both cattle and inhabitants.

When rustling was at its height in the Floridas and in Louisiana, there arose many vigilante committees under a general head. These chieftains were known as "Regulators." When a rustler was caught with stolen cattle, he was given the usual thirty-nine stripes with a lash, and told to "go West." As Texas was the American frontier then, the men either had to go to Texas, New Mexico, Arizona or California, and the rustler followed the cattle trail westward.

Blood-Thirsty Apaches

Cattle rustling started in Texas shortly after the appearance of American colonies which came about in 1825. Cattle ranches began helping themselves to all the loose cattle. The worst depredators in the rustling business in southwest territory, were unquestionably the fierce Apache Indians. They were the most bloodthirsty of all the cattle rustlers. They had two objects—to kill the white man, and to steal his stock. The Apaches had been badly treated by the conquering Spaniards, and for the wrongs inflicted upon them by the Spanish government, they murdered and killed both the American and the Spanish settlers.

The Apaches, like the Mayas of Old Mexico, were at first a peaceful tribe of Indians, but they had never forgotten the cruelties practiced on them by their Spanish masters. They cared little for ranch life; they did not want to raise stock and they had quit hunting game, living mostly on stolen cattle.

Finally, the United States Government sent a division of about 4000 soldiers to quell the Indian uprising. The Indians, being shrewd and cunning and

fierce fighters, surrounded the entire division and killed about half of the soldiers before they were finally subdued and driven on to a reservation to keep the peace.

A Lost Art

However, cattle rustling in the West has become more or less a lost art although some rustling is still done in spots, here and there. Until recent years some of the cattle kings were not above rustling indirectly. The rancher who got the first look at a "slickear" or maverick, put on his brand. It was legitimate enough. It was then the unwritten law of the range, and to brand mavericks was everybody's right.

About forty years ago when I began my cowpunching career there were still some mighty big cow outfits in the West. I worked on not a few of these spreads—namely, the Old Hatchet Ranch, the Half Circle, in Colorado, and also the Diamond A, of Colorado and Texas. This cow outfit ranged no less than 70,000 head; the Two Dot ranch of Montana grazed no less than 25,000 head.

I also worked for the Carry Brothers in Route County, Colorado, and they, too, ranged about 25,000 head. Then, there were the Miller and Lux outfits of California; it was said they ranged nearly 250,000 head on their ranges. However, I believe the biggest cow outfit on this hemisphere was in Old Mexico. Old Tarasses who grazed 1,000,000 head of cattle; 500,000 head of horses, 300,000 head of sheep and goats, and about 10,000 head of hogs.

Not a few of these early cow outfits had a standing offer to its riders. The boss paid you from two to four dollars a head, if you could put the company's brand on any "outside" stock. That is, when a maverick was found, you never asked questions, just roped it, and with a saddle ring—which we all packed in those days—branded the maverick. We kept tally, too. If the boss was honest,

he gave you that extra two or three dollars. If he did not pay you, he soon lost a lot of his own cattle. Cowpunchers had a way of getting even.

The Maverick

The word "maverick" came from Samuel Maverick, a cattle king of Texas. Strange, Samuel Maverick never branded his cattle, and, as the saying went, he gained about as many as he had lost. Samuel Maverick claimed everything on the range that wore hair and no brand. In short, Samuel Maverick worked a clean riata as much as the other cow outfits worked a hungry maverick rope.

Perhaps Samuel Maverick was moved by pity for the animals, for branding, after all, seems to be a bit cruel. Branding, however, was the only sure way to mark cattle on the ranges. And the system of branding cattle was actually an ultimatum to the rustler proper, who, when caught, was more often led to the nearest tree.

Branding, meaning to burn a mark on with a hot iron, was inflicted on criminals as a punishment in the long, long ago. The ancient Romans branded criminals who were condemned to fight lions in the gladiatorial arena. The Romans also branded vagabonds, gypsies and other shiftless persons. In Old England

criminals were also branded. It was from this cruel practice and custom that the cattle kings of Texas got the idea of marking cattle. And the spread of rustling led to the branding of cattle in all the western states.

The origin of the term "rustler" as applied to a cattle thief, is about as vague and confusing as the original of his business. The word "rustler" means an industrious person, one who "rustles" and bargains for trade and business in honest enterprise. When the word "rustler" is applied to a cattleman, it has an opposite meaning—a thief.

As Old as Sin

Thus, rustling and branding and the cattle industry, is as old as sin itself. Rustling and branding began ages ago in the Orient, and spread finally to our own wild and woolly West: the Egyptians, Arabs, the Dutch, the English Colonists, the Spanish Conquerors, and lastly, our own western ranchers, had a hand in a maverick-hungry riata and the branding iron.

The original longhorn breed of cattle, with the exception of a few small herds, privately owned, has long become extinct, but not so the rustler. He is still with us, and he has the same bad blood that existed in the thief of all ages. The rustler has never changed his spots.



WHAT BOOTS IT?

There's lots of proverbs in the West,

But here is one that's real—

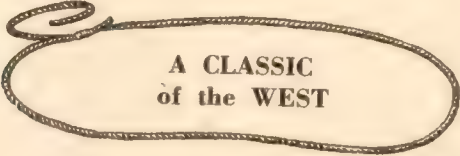
A tenderfoot can't toe the mark

If he should be a heel.

—Pecos Pete

DEEP WINTER

By ERNEST HAYCOX



A CLASSIC
of the WEST

ONE night the snow came, drifting soundless out of a sky that lay gray and close upon Ingrid settlement and the four hundred homesteaders scattered across the flats. By the fourth morning all fence lines were dark wrinkles dimly showing on the snow's crust, and drifts lay, against homestead shanties four feet high. Breaking road between his quarter section and Ingrid, Tom Kertcher noticed how straight the smoke rose from shanty chimneys, through the very thin air.

He had mounted a wagon bed on homemade sled runners and had fashioned a sort of leathern snowshoe for his horses; even so the going was labored, the horses now and then plunging into the snow's soft spots.

He came into Ingrid, passed Mrs. Rand's hotel and Solomon's store, and drew up before Brewerton's blacksmith shop and house. Letty Brewerton had seen him approaching and was at the shanty door, smiling for him. Kertcher said, "Sort of an American Siberia," and got off the seat. He was plain and solid, an easy and practical man with coal-black hair above a strong nose and mouth, and not much of a hand to give his feelings away. But when he looked at her she saw how pleased he

was to be with her—there was that unreserved approval in his eyes. "I'm breaking road," he said. "Maybe you'd like to go for a ride."

She said, "Wait until I get my coat," and disappeared. Brewerton, Letty's father, worked in the adjoining shed, the sound of his blacksmith hammer very harsh in the thin air. Letty's mother appeared at the doorway to say a few words.

Kertcher said, "Likely to have a norther. You have plenty of wood?"

"It is piled beyond the shop," said Mrs. Brewerton.

"Not close enough. In a real blizzard you couldn't walk that far."

Letty came out and stepped into the sled and he tucked a blanket around her. Mrs. Brewerton called, "Keep warm, Letty," and cast a curious glance at them as they drove away, never quite certain how things were between these two.

Letty said, "Miss me?"

"Four days is a long time."

"That's nice," she murmured. She bent her shoulder so that it touched Kertcher and thus they drove along the road, two calm and reticent people who had reached some kind of an understanding without ever speaking of it. They passed Swenson's house at the

It Takes a Raging Storm to Show the True



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originally published in *Collier's Magazine*

junction of the schoolhouse road; they continued south, coming by Ben Lowe's place—a small shack and attached tent, housing Lowe and his wife and four children. A mound of snow in the yard indicated where Lowe, the most shiftless of men, had left his plow and cultivator to rust away.

"I don't think they've much wood or food," Letty said.

"He sat around all fall, cryin' about hard luck when everybody else worked."

"I can't think of his family being hungry."

"Put him in the middle of a store and he'd be too lazy to reach up to a shelf."

They moved on, following the first ruts cut by Kertcher and, five miles from Ingrid, they turned into Kertcher's quarter section and stopped before the shanty.

He sat still for a moment, staring straight before him. He said slowly, "If I take you into the house, Letty,

Worth of These Warm-Hearted Homesteaders!

"I'll kiss you—and maybe we shouldn't be hiding a thing like that behind four walls." He turned to her, drew her against him and looked down at her so that she saw the sharp angles of his heavy mouth. She lifted her head and knew she provoked him into the kiss and was glad of it; she was smiling when she pulled away from him and got out of the sled and waited for him to open the door.

He had built larger than most homesteaders, and he had built with more care. The house had three rooms, all of them sealed in with finish lumber. A rear door opened onto a shed which was filled with wood. Beyond the shed was a small lean-to barn.

Letty knew the house had been built for her; it was one of those unsaid things between them. But she also knew Tom would not ask her to marry him until fall had come and he had put away his first crop as a demonstration that he was able to provide for her. He was that way. But when she thought of how close they were, and how many good days they were missing, and of how much she could do for him, she had an instant when she wanted to cry.

She looked at him and he saw something of what she felt, for he drew a long breath. "We'd better get out of here before I—"

"Why shouldn't you?"

FOR a moment they stood staring at each other. Presently he dropped his eyes. "I think," he said, "we ought to start back." Once more on the sleigh seat he paused to fill and light his pipe and he brought the scene to safer ground. "Dirty weather coming. I wish the people on the flats had better shelter."

Going back down the road, her own thoughts still confused, she realized how natural it was for him to worry about the homesteaders; he had a streak of responsibility in him that people felt, and because of that he had come to be somewhat of a leader on the flat, with-

out his asking.

They followed the waggling ruts of their previous trip as far as the Lowe shanty and turned into the yard. Mrs. Lowe opened the door for them, a heavy, shapeless woman, unkempt and complaining. She made an ineffectual swipe at her hair and invited them in, using half of the same breath to condemn the weather.

"Nobody can do anything," she wailed. "It an't any use even to try. We've all got chills."

The four children, from three to nine, were underfoot in the single room of the shanty and the place was in complete confusion. A stove and table crowded one side, a bed occupied most of the other—and Lowe lay covered with quilts on the bed, smoking his pipe. A doorway without a door led into a tent which formed the second room.

Mrs. Lowe's eyes saw at once that both Letty and Kertcher were unfavorably impressed with Lowe's idleness and she sprang to her husband's defense. "He ain't been well all fall. He never got over a sprain to his back durin' the summer."

"You ought to put a door against that tent," said Kertcher. "You're burnin' wood to heat the whole outside world."

"I'll get to it," said Lowe and seemed contented enough with his pipe.

Letty's quick glance meanwhile noted the cupboard and saw nothing much in the line of food. She turned to the door with Tom Kertcher, speaking casually to Mrs. Lowe:

"There's always a few neighbors in at Mrs. Rand's during the evenings. Come over."

"If I can get my chores done we may come," said Lowe.

Kertcher spoke with an irritated disgust when they drove away: "Too lazy to get up and walk half a mile to get his kids warm."

Coming into the hotel that evening, Kertcher found the usual round-about group gathered—the Brewertons, Mrs. Rand and her daughter Tara, old Solo-

mon who had recently built the store, the Swensons and Judith Prescott, the teacher who boarded with them. The Jacksons had come in from the school-house section, riding with Curtis Kilrain and Elizabeth Marsh. Andy Pierce had made the trip from his Oxhead ranch and Charley Graves was just in with mail from Virgil, five hours late on the trip, bringing the sheriff with him. The Lowes came in with their children shortly after Kertcher arrived.

The sheriff, going his rounds of duty with an eye for new friends as well, was an excellent storyteller, and the sharpness of the weather put everybody in excellent spirits. The men more or less grouped together while the ladies went into the kitchen to help Mrs. Rand, who presently came out with a tray of sandwiches and a pot of coffee.

Kertcher noticed that Letty made a point of serving the Lowe youngsters; and he noticed too, how Ben Lowe's eyes came over to observe that. When Letty offered Lowe a sandwich, he refused it. "Just ate—not hungry," he said. The man was lying, of course, yet Kertcher saw something in Lowe then that he had not seen before, which was pride. Meanwhile, the talk went on, weather and crops and roads and politics and babies. During the tag end of the evening the sheriff drew Kertcher aside.

"I can't cover all this county," he said. "Should be a deputy down here. It's only worth thirty a month, but among you homesteaders that's helpful money. I thought of you, naturally."

"I don't need it."

"Then I give you the disposal of the job," said the sheriff. "You pick the man."

"I'll get you somebody," Kertcher said.

"Done," said the sheriff, and moved toward the ladies, having some sort of a word for each of them.

The Lowes, late arrived, were first to go; and as they moved toward the door Kertcher caught an expression from Letty. She came by him, murmuring,

"Give him some kind of work, Tom."

Being a hard-laboring man, Kertcher had no stomach for the suggestion. Nevertheless he walked toward the doorway, stopping Lowe.

"Ben," he said, "I could use some help tomorrow. I've got some timbers to fit in the barn."

Lowe studied it. "I got a lot of chores of my own," he said, "but maybe I can do it for you."

He walked into the night, leaving the plain intimation that it was he who conferred the favor.

Kertcher expected Lowe by eight in the morning, but it was beyond nine when the man showed up in the barn. "Long walk," he explained, "and I had some chores to do first." He was prepared to spend another half-hour in conversation, but Kertcher gave him an adz and set him to the chore of dubbing the end of a six-by-six timber; all this was indoor work, in preparation for springtime when the barn frame would be lifted into place.

Promptly at noon, Lowe dropped the adz and followed Kertcher into the house, sitting by while Kertcher turned out a bachelor's meal. There was no end to the man's self-esteem or his assurance. He had a firm opinion on any subject; and one by one he brought these subjects up, settled them and went on to another. At one, they returned to work; at four o'clock Kertcher said, "That'll be all, Ben," and found three dollars in his pocket.

His temper was sorely strained by the manner in which Lowe accepted the money.

"I've made better wages, Kertcher—but if that's all you feel you can give I won't argue."

"Fine," said Kertcher, and watched Lowe depart. The man, he thought, had no knowledge of his own failure.

THE following morning was biting cold and the air had an extreme thinness, but the woolly clouds remained low, obscuring that monument of out-

lawry half a mile across the river—Brazil Mullan's long cabin and barn. Kertcher thought, "Storm around the corner," and spent half a day bringing water up from the river, two buckets at a time. He cooked himself a noon meal and began to think of his neighbors, most of whom were city people with no knowledge of real bad weather.

Around three o'clock he hitched and started for Ingrid. He dropped a warning at Swenson's and touched as far as the Jackson place. There was a dull streak in the north and the air, damp as it was, had an electric feel. When he got as far as Mrs. Rand's he observed Ben Lowe coming from the back of the hotel.

"Ben," he said, "watch out. Storm coming."

"Been through a lot of them," said Lowe and moved homeward.

Kertcher noticed both Harriet Rand and Letty at the back door, and left his sled to join them. There was a pile of wood scattered around the doorway, recently chopped. Mrs. Rand said uncertainly, "Is that as much as a man should chop in a day?"

"You hired him to do this?" Kertcher asked. "How much did you pay him?"

"Four dollars," said Mrs. Rand. "Was that about right? He needed the work."

Kertcher studied the pile of wood, holding himself strictly under control. "Harriet," he said very quietly, "better to feed him outright than be bilked like this."

"He has pride," said Letty. "He wouldn't stand charity."

"He'll stand that before he'll stand starving," said Kertcher. He thought of his original purpose in coming here, warned the two women of the storm and turned back to his sled. He caught up with Lowe at the latter's front door.

"Ben," he said, "you figure that a day's work you did for Mrs. Rand?"

Lowe gave him an affronted glance. "She didn't have to hire me."

"Well," said Kertcher, "that's pure gall. You sting a woman hard up as you are and then you stand there and say

it was her fault. What's the matter with your mind?"

Mrs. Lowe flung open the door and stood behind her husband. "You stop talking like that to my husband, Tom Kertcher!"

Lowe reached around with an arm and pushed his wife into the house. He reared up and tossed his shoulders back. "If that's the way you people think about a few stinkin' dollars—" he yelled, digging into his pocket for the four silver pieces and flinging them into the snow—"I don't need the dirty stuff!" Then he wheeled into the house.

Tom Kertcher went down the road, half ashamed of himself. He thought, "Darned fool really believes he's a big man stoopin' to small chores." He looked back, and at the moment saw Mrs. Lowe on her hands and knees in the snow digging for the money Lowe had thrown away.

Mrs. Lowe found three of the four dollars and went back into the house. "Ben, you shouldn't of done that," she said. "We won't find the other dollar until spring."

He lay down on the bed and lighted his pipe. "She didn't have to hire me."

"We need the money," said Mrs. Lowe in her complaining voice. She lighted a lamp and set about dinner. The young ones played around the cramped quarters, behind the stove and under the bed.

"Pete," said Lowe to the nine-year-old, "go bring some wood into the tent."

"Never mind," said Mrs. Lowe, "I'll do it myself later. Come on to supper."

He got up, moved two paces and sat down to the table, the youngsters crowding around him, Mrs. Lowe standing. The meal was bacon, beans and coffee; even the youngest one had his share of the coffee. Lowe ate what he wanted, drank his coffee and returned to the bed.

"Libby, help your ma with the dishes," he ordered.

"I can't be wipin' your nose all winter."

"Libby, go to bed," said Mrs. Lowe.

Lowe watched Libby go through the blank doorway into the tent. He said, "I'll put up a door tomorrow. Maybe bank a wall of snow all around the tent. That'll be warm—way the Eskimos live."

"Don't hurry about it," said Mrs. Lowe. "Spring's only four months away."

She finished the dishes, chased the children to bed and undressed by the stove. She fed the stove a last time, turned the damper not quite shut and blew out the light. The weight of her body, when she settled into bed, lifted Lowe's side a full six inches. He got up, took off his shoes and pants and shirt; then sat crouched on the bed's edge, smoking his pipe in the dark.

"I always had a fine pen hand," he said. "I could put Solomon's books in fine shape. Or I could run for sheriff. I could beat that fellow. I'm the only man with an education around here."

She reached out with a rough but affectionate arm and pulled him flat. "Get under the covers, you fool."

After breakfast next morning, Ben Lowe went outside and circled the house. He yelled, "Pete, bring in some wood for your mother," and came back to the kitchen. Mrs. Lowe said, "Keep out of my way this mornin'. I got to wash."

He stood still in the front room, watching her. "Emma," he said, "you think that's what people think about me?"

"I know all your old tunes, Lowe. Don't start no new ones and upset me."

He got his rifle and sat on the bed and oiled it; he put four cartridges into his pocket and struggled into his big coat. Mrs. Lowe gave him a sharp look.

"What you got on your mind now?"

"I hear there's antelope down by the river."

"Ah," she scoffed, "you couldn't hit a barn."

"But," he said, "I can provide for my family. They can't say I can't."

He went out the door and slammed it behind him.

KERTCHER stood in the yard and studied the morning sky and saw the sheet of blackness in the north; the wind, also from the north, would be bringing that blackness on. The air was perfectly still, and as thin as he could ever remember it being. Turning into the barn, he hitched the sled and threw in such rope as he could find and drove it to the front yard. He got all his blankets off the bed, put on an extra shirt and an extra pair of socks; he took a bottle of whiskey from the cupboard, slid a compass in his packet and started for Ingrid.

All of the homestead shanties were flimsy enough, but some of them were so loosely thrown together that a seventy-mile wind would tear them apart unless they were guyed to the ground; and that meant a family wiped out within half an hour of exposure. He turned immediately east. He stopped at Pilkington's, Rath's and McCory's, saying the same thing each time: "Real blizzard coming. Pile wood up against the side of your house for an anchor. Get some water inside in case your chimney catches fire. If you burn out you're helpless. Don't try to go anywhere once it hits. You couldn't walk a straight line and you couldn't see. Warn your nearest neighbor."

He circled Charley Morlett's place, a mile east of the school, and went on to Parch Cobbin's, with the black wall of weather bearing down fast.

"Get your place tied down," he called to Cobbin, and headed for Ben Lowe's.

Half a mile from Cobbin's, he felt a warning breath of wind; and then the silence broke and he heard the distant rumbling and sighing and shrilling of the blizzard. He had the horses pointed straight upon the small vague shape of the Lowe shanty; in the semidarkness closing around him he took out his compass and got his bearings on the Lowe place. Half a minute later he looked up to see something lift and sail like a giant section of paper through the sky. That

would be the Lowes' tent.

The horses veered from the wind and in one great transition from half-light to smothered dark, the Lowe shanty faded from sight. He was then less than a quarter mile from his target and by instinct he pulled the team constantly to the north; but even so, when he looked at his compass he found he had drifted. He said to himself, "Bad night," and listened to the words rip away from his mouth. "If I miss the place—" He caught it as a shadow on his right and swung the sled hard by the door. He yelled at the door and saw Mrs. Lowe open it. He said, "Get in!"

She was a shapeless, frightened woman with her hair blowing over her face, her children crowded close around her. "Lowe's gone! I got to stay and keep a light burnin'!"

He jumped from the sled and seized the children one by one. He pulled at the reluctant woman, one eye constantly on the restless horses. "Your house won't be here in half an hour!"

She fought with him and she began to cry. "I told him not to go! He'll die!" When he drove away he had to hold her from jumping out. She was a big, loose woman and hard to hold; so that he finally had to beat her will down with strong language: "Don't be a fool! You want the kids to die?"

He pulled the team into the drive of the blizzard and held them into it, searching for Ingrid's lights. He tried his compass again and saw the vague swinging of the needle. He heard Mrs. Lowe cry something at him and afterward she climbed back into the wagon box with her children. Forward he thought he saw a wisp of a gleam to the left, and the sled runners grated over some kind of metal. He turned left, caught the light a second time and used it for a beacon, drawing up before Mrs. Rand's hotel. Lowe's wife climbed out with her children and hurried inside. Kertcher swung the team between the hotel and the store and beat his way back to the hotel.

Half the settlement had collected here and Mrs. Lowe was crying out her story, her big face homely with despair: "Lowe's gone—"

Kertcher said, "When did he leave? Which way did he go?"

"Nine o'clock. He said there was antelope by the river."

Andy Pierce and Charley Graves, both cowmen who knew the country well, gave Kertcher grave side glances.

"He'd follow the road," surmised Kertcher, "because it is easier walkin'. He might have smelled trouble and ducked into my house."

Andy Pierce used that as reassurance for Mrs. Lowe. "Sure he did."

But Kertcher doubted it. He drew Pierce and Graves aside. "The fool's lost. I've got to go look."

"Don't be a sucker," said Pierce. "It'll blow your scalp off in another two hours."

"I can get as far as my place," said Kertcher. "Might find him on the road. He'll walk until he's all done in and he'll drop."

"Thin chance. How you goin' to get home?" Pierce asked.

"Wind at my back. Five miles exactly. Straight south and use a compass."

"That's two men dead instead of one. I'm telling you."

Charley Graves said, "Half an hour out in that stuff and you'll lose the ability to calculate distance. On top of that your horses may refuse to face the weather."

Mrs. Lowe saw them standing together. She searched them with her eyes and seemed to see an answer, for suddenly she spoke at them in a dull, small voice: "I know what you think of him. But he's my man, isn't he?"

NOBODY said a word. Kertcher looked at her and suddenly he smiled at her and turned toward the door. Pierce and Graves followed him and Letty Brewerton said, "Wait," and came up to him. There was a kind of hardness on her face, made by fear. She wanted to

hold him back, she wanted to tell him of her fear. But all she said was: "Are you warm enough, Tom?"

"Yes," he said, and smiled again.

Charley Graves said, "Longer we wait the thicker it gets."

"Who's we?" asked Kertcher, and then noticed that Charley had borrowed Pierce's huge buffalo coat.

"Two fools are better than one," said Charley. When he opened the door a great wind and a great crying rushed in. The two men bent against it, closed the door and beat their way to the sled and team parked between the two buildings. The wind's terrible force keeled both men on the seat when they swung out of that shelter and turned south. Charley Graves yelled, "Now, ain't this silly?" For a moment Kertcher saw Mrs. Rand's hotel lights dancing in the flitter of snow; twenty feet onward he looked back and saw only blackness. Charley Graves shouted: "Keep the wind centered on your tail bone—that's north kickin' at you."

The storm was a hard, steady push on Kertcher's shoulders. When he turned his head, wind drove breath into his nostrils, making him open his mouth to catch air, and the drive of snow stung his cheeks like small buckshot. It was, he guessed, two o'clock in the afternoon with the blizzard's darkness pressing down and the tumult of the blizzard making its wild, polar confusion all around him. He tried to sight Lee Gantry's shanty, slightly short of the school-house turn-off, and found nothing; and then, looking upon the smothered blankness in front of him he felt the complete futility of seeking one man in a blind area of perhaps fifty square miles.

Charley Graves cried, "That big off mare of yours has got a longer reach than the other mare! Pulls you to the left!" Kertcher felt a sharper bite on his left cheek and headed the team rightward. The sled's runners scraped metal and bumped against wood. "Fence!" whooped Graves. "Still on the road!"

Kertcher bent over to take the pressure from his shoulders. He had a scarf wound around his face, but the wind got beneath it and crashed into his ears. Working with the wind in this manner he felt as though team and sled were coasting down a steady hill, and the feeling tricked his judgment of distance. The horses were going at a boosted walk, better than three miles an hour, at which rate he should reach his shanty in about an hour and a half. He pulled out his watch and handed it to Charley. "We left Brewerton's at ten minutes of two. What time now?"

Graves put his nose against the watch. He held it a long while. "Looks like a quarter after. Don't seem that long. You're swingin' left again!"

Kertcher pulled right. Snow began to build up a drift in the fore part of the wagon box, chilling his feet. He stamped his feet and he thought of Ben Lowe, visualizing the man's heavy, self-satisfied face; and irritation built a heat in him. The sled runners sent back a different sound and the horses fiddled as they walked.

"What's that?" yelled Charley Graves.

Kertcher stopped the team, and Charley Graves cautiously left the sled. There was a steady crying roar over Kertcher's head, a vast dismal yell coming out of upper emptiness. He boxed his hands together and felt coldness move through his clothes and through his bones, like oncoming sleep. Charley Graves came back.

"Somethin' on the snow, like canvas! Petered out in my direction!"

Kertcher handed over the reins and went off his side of the sled. He dug his feet into something half solid and got down and crawled. He struck a rope and sat still a moment, trying to figure it, and then remembered Lowe's tent that had blown away. He turned back at a slightly different angle, still crawling, and reached a rolled-up section of the tent; something gave beneath him and something moved. He dug into the roll, found

a loose edge and put his head beneath it. A hand came up and struck him across the face and a voice said: "Who's that?" That was Lowe's voice. Then Lowe said: "Pull down that edge—you're lettin' cold air in!"

Kertcher stood up and jerked the covering away, bringing Lowe to his feet. He pushed the man toward the sled. "Here's Lowe! Drive up a few feet!"

He heard Charley Graves' cussed-out astonishment as the latter drove the team on. He turned back, intending to salvage the tent, but as he dropped to his knees the wind lifted the canvas and he saw it rise into the air, like a giant bat, and vanish. He crawled back to the sled and took the reins. The wind had gotten thoroughly into him and he was chilled through and began to shake; when he swung the sled around into the full beat of the blizzard he felt a kind of strained rigidity in his muscles. He knew then they were all in danger.

Lowe crouched in the wagon bed behind Kertcher's back. He yelled: "Mighty foolish thing for you to do! I was warm in that tent! I could of stayed there all week!"

Kertcher restrained his answer; he heard Charlie Graves yell back at Lowe: "How the hell did you find the tent?"

"It just sailed through the air at me. I grabbed it and rolled into it!"

"The Lord sure protects some people!" howled Charley.

THE blast was hard to take, but Kertcher had to keep it directly against him to be sure he was traveling north. When he felt the force of it drop off from one side of his face he knew he was veering and pulled the reluctant team around. In this blackness it was impossible to read the compass.

"See anything?" yelled Charley. "No!"

The snow whipped against him, knife-like as it struck his exposed face skin; and sleet formed on his eyebrows. He stamped on the wagon bed to bring feeling back into his dead feet. There

never was a moment when he didn't have to wrestle the horses back into wind; they were taking a beating and they didn't like it. He got to thinking of how small a target Ingrid was—just a spot a hundred feet wide in a hundred-mile distance—and felt the runners scrape across metal again.

"Road fence!" bellowed Charley Graves. "We're on the track!"

Tom Kertcher wasn't sure. The constant flicker of mealy snow threw his vision off; it gave him a feeling of unbalance, and the constant rush and roar of the wind disturbed his judgment. He had, he realized, lost his sense of direction completely. That was probably why so many men died when they got caught in a thing like this. He thought he saw the shadow of a shanty on his left and he pulled over and found it only an illusion. He straightened again, but he felt the growing weakness of the horses. If they stalled on him there was only one thing left—tip over the wagon box and crawl beneath it with the blankets and hope to live out the storm.

The horses stopped and refused to go straight on, as much as he urged them. He hauled them half around, and got them started, but Charley Graves called, "Wait!" and slipped from the sled, disappearing. When he came back he yelled, "That was the big survey post. We've overshot Ingrid. Turn left—half a mile to go. Feelin' a little cool?"

"Sleepy."

Charley Graves hit him a heavy blow on the back. "Wrong place to sleep!"

The horses were half-heartedly pulling; wind carried them sidewise steadily, so that Kertcher was pointing them back at every short distance. He closed his eyes to visualize the movement of the sled across that half-mile; far off he heard a sound, and then he felt a great wallop on his back, and opened his eyes to hear Charley Graves speaking: "I think there's a light off to the right."

He looked and saw no light; the constant lacing of the snow made a thousand vague points that looked like dis-

tant flashes. But he pulled to the right and stood up to slash the rein ends down on the horses; they stopped on him, and then he realized the wind no longer blew against him. There was a howling behind him and a roar ahead of him, but here in this spot was a strange calm. "Must be losing my head," he thought.

He gave the reins to Charley Graves, left the sled and walked straight into the black side of a building. He stood against it and yelled, pounded his fists against the building. A door came open and he saw Brewerton in the light—Brewerton and Pierce and other people suddenly behind these two. It occurred to him then that the team had cut a complete circle around Ingrid and had drifted between the hotel and the store.

Graves and Ben Lowe came up. Brewerton said, "I'll take the team. You get in the house."

"Wait," said Graves. He bent and caught a handful of snow, shoved it against Kertcher's face. "Feel that?"

"Yes."

"Then we can go in," said Charley. Ben Lowe had gone ahead of them, lugging something in his arms. When Kertcher got into Mrs. Rand's kitchen he found the settlement group gathered there and saw Ben Lowe standing before his wife with a quarter of beef. Lowe said, "Here's some meat, Mamma."

There wasn't a word in the room. Lowe's wife looked at him, long and straight and affectionate, and it seemed to Kertcher she was a younger woman than he had guessed her to be. She said, softly, "Put that down, Lowe," and when he put it down she threw out her heavy arms and hugged him. "You're a fool," she said. "Such a terrible big fool. You caused so much trouble."

Lowe said, "I'm all right." He gave Kertcher and Graves a self-assured grin. "I'm warmer than those fellows. Think I can stand weather better than they can. Foolish of them to come after me. I was comfortable."

Charley Graves had been studying the beef. "Where'd you get that?"

"Shot it," said Lowe, and grinned at Charley Graves' shocked face. "But that's all right, too. I got to thinkin'. Here's people hungry and there's Brazil Mullan across the river—a thief and a rustler eatin' well off beef that ain't his. So I went over and shot one of his cows. He heard the shot and came out with a couple of men, but I drove them back just when the storm broke." He had an audience. And he felt big about it; he was the same old Lowe again and he spoke to Kertcher with his egotism beginning to show: "I don't know why people should be afraid of that crowd. I'd take my chances against 'em any day." Having said it he took his wife's arm and moved on into the big room.

Charley Graves shook his head, repeating a former observation: "The Lord sure protects some people."

"Well," said Kertcher, "he believes he's as tough as Mullan, and I sort of think he means it. He's no good for some things, but for some things he might do well—particularly the kind of a thing in which he feels big, and has to live up to it." He grinned at Charley Graves, at Andy Pierce. "There's your deputy sheriff. The thirty a month will keep him from starvin' and I believe he'll do all right."

Letty was near him, watching him; and now he looked at her and forgot there was anybody else in the kitchen. But the others understood about this and somebody started for the big room so that presently Letty and Kertcher stood alone. He had some trouble getting his pipe out of his pocket because of the stiffness of his hands. He packed and lighted it and the smoke burned his wind-blistered skin. Letty stepped nearer him, looking up with her sweet, grave expression. He saw the warmth in her eyes and he felt the warmth of her voice: "Cold outside, Tom?"

"Somewhat chilly."

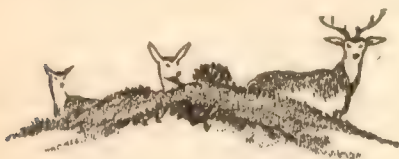
That was the end of it, neither of them being of the talkative kind. He pulled his pipe down, cast a quick glance at the doorway, and bent and kissed her.

QUESTIONS

HUNTING

Question: I'm going after deer with two companions on the upper peninsula. I don't want to appear a greenhorn. What shall I wear, take along for sleeping and eating equipment?—Dan Trondeau, Detroit, Mich.

Answer: There's no need to stutter here. Get the best down sleeping bag you can afford. Nothing can beat it. If you can pick up an air-force officer's bag you'll have a bargain. Be sure that it isn't the thick, heavy, buttoned air-force arctic bag. Any down bag should have a zipper across the ends and down one side, for opening to air. An air mattress is light to pack, and comfortable. Lacking this, make your own from evergreen fronds or ferns. For clothes wear heavy soled boots below knee height; if in wet country have rubber bottoms on them. Be sure they are well broken in before you start. Rub neatsfoot oil into leather boots. Use heavy woolen socks in those boots of yours and regardless of weather. Have an extra pair and



change each day. Red wool shirt for upper body with red checkered makinaw when cold. Don't wear heavy canvas pants—they whistle while walking. Wool is better. Choose a hat that doesn't look like a buck, and that shades your eyes. For eating I like the old army mess kit, throwing away the heavy aluminum cup, which burns your lips. It gets cold in the upper peninsula in October and that coffee will be hot.

Question: What distance should I sight my new .270 Winchester in at for deer in my country? What about my partner's .30-06?—Vance Reedley, Santa Fé, New Mexico.

Answer: Two hundred yards. Sighted here your .270 will shoot three inches high at 100

yards, two high at 150, four low at 250, using the 150 grain bullet. Using the 130 grain the figures will change to two high at 100, one high at 150, three low at 250. There will not be enough difference to worry about, from these figures on the .30-06, using the 150 grain slug, sighted in at 200. Thus sighted you can just about shoot flat at your deer between ranges of 100 yards and 250. Using iron sights, that about covers it.

Question: I seem to be able to hit flying pheasants, but miss like the dickens on quail. What's my trouble?—Red Driftcorn, Morgantown, W. Va.



Answer: Who doesn't miss quail?

In the first place the target is smaller, and up-jumping quail often jitter the gunner. If they're bob-whites, which they must be in your country, hold your fire until they float, especially if your gun is choke bored. If in brushed country better get a three-quarter choke or wider bore. Take it easy and lead 'em, Red.

Question: I've got a six-month-old cocker spaniel. Is this breed good for bird work this fall? Will a cocker point? How shall I go about training?—Bill Zandy, Mitchell, So. Dak.

Answer: This is a large order, and time is short. The cocker makes one of the best all around bird dogs, properly trained. Some of them are lazy, but if you have a peppy one you've got something. They won't point, but you'll know when birds are before you, and how near. Watch the wringing of that tail. Better get busy fast on training. Here's how, briefly.

Get the dog to bring you a ball of feathers, preferably quail, as a game. Never force him beyond the point that he WANTS to play it. Hold the end of his tail firmly when you throw it, saying, "Steady." Release your hold and say, "Fetch." When he brings it never try to take it away by force, by quickness, or by chasing

& FISHING ANSWERS

him. Be serious about it. With thumb and forefinger gently pry open his mouth, holding the other hand below it, and saying "Drop."

Soon, if your dog is as intelligent and eager to work as most cockers, you can throw the feather ball, holding him with just the word, send him after it with the word, and get the ball laid in your hand with the word, all without touching him. As soon as this point is reached, trail your feathers with a string around



the yard and hide them, when the dog can't see you. Put him on the end of the trail and say, "Fetch." I'll bet you an ounce of shot that you get those feathers laid in your hand, and quick. If you can't get quail feathers, which scent the cocker likes best, get grouse, pheasant and lastly duck. A cocker so trained will often work nicely the first time out. Most of mine did.

Question: I usually fish in the spring, but my vacation comes in the fall this year. Do I change tackle or technique on trout?—Lawrence Stone, Boulder, Colo.

Answer: You change both, usually. Water is lower and clearer. Fish more wary on account of this and because of heavy summer fishing. If possible change from tapered to torpedo line. Use number four on five ounce rod. Coiling this line in the hand permits farther shoot—you scare less fish. Use dry flies instead of wet, unless rains have raised the water. Fish earlier and later in the day. Even in low water lunkers linger in deep, dark holes. Try for them with artificials, such as Russelure in yellow and orange, Daredevil and Flatfish. Insect hatches are often sudden and heavy in

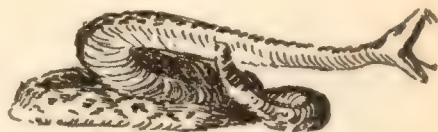
October. Match them with your flies. It is a great time to fish.

Question: My tent leaks. How can I water proof it?—Hartley Frazier, Berks, Pa.

Answer: Dissolve paraffin in white gasoline. Warm the gasoline in a tub of water, preferably outside and take care of fire. Paint this on your tent warm, and brush in well.

Question: We use army cots for camping. They are cold, even on slightly chilly nights.—Don George, Snohomish, Wash.

Answer: Brother, are they! Still, I use them in insect or snake country in summer or fall. They are useless without warm sleeping bags



and a good mattress. If using blankets, put several layers of newspapers on the cot surface.

Question: We still fish for several kinds of fish here. I don't have much luck, even when those about me catch fish. My bait may be right beside others. What's wrong with me?—Art Fogel, Munroe, Tenn.

Answer: I'll give you a reply on that one, Art, but I won't guarantee it to be correct. This is something that I have been studying for a long time. Do you smoke, holding cigarette or pipe in your hands a great deal of the time? Do you handle your bait with your fingers. I have noted that in still fishing, where the bait is inspected closely before the fish "takes" as a general rule, that often it is the non-smoker who keeps getting bites when the smoker doesn't. It is only a hunch of mine, but may be worth something. Wear bait smeared gloves a couple of times and see what happens.

F. H. A.

THE CIRCUIT

Hosea Whitehead was weary of the gospel trail, but he found out psalm-singing could be just as effective as gun-slinging



"Maybe you can outrun my knife," Frenchy said to Hosey

RIDER'S SON

a novelet by **WALT COBURN**

I

IT WAS getting daylight when Hosea Whitehead got back to the ranch from the 'breed dance on Lodge Pole Creek. When he saw the big gray mule in the feed corral Hosea knew that his circuit rider preacher father was home after two months on the gospel trail.

"All I need now," his bruised lips twisted in an ugly grin, "is for that psalm shoutin' old fool to commence his bellerin', and I'm willin' to call it a night."

Then he remembered the three stolen yearling colts he had tied in the log barn and the half defiant drunken grin on his face faded. He had better think fast. And make it good. Because Matthew Whitehead was a hard man to lie to.

He had his horse pulled up and was reining him around to turn back when he heard his father's deep toned sonorous voice call from the porch in front of the whitewashed log cabin he called the Gospel House.

"Hosea! Is that you, Son?"

He hated that voice as he hated no other sound on the face of the earth. Hated the baptismal name his father had given him when he immersed him in the cold waters of Jordan Creek. *Hosea!* What a hell of a name to give a kid! He had shortened it to Hosey, but he still had to fight the kids when they called him Hosea or Hosannah in the Highest, the preacher's son, making a sing-song rhyming jingle of it and coupling it with the gray mule Mat-

thew Whitehead rode, calling the mule a white jackass.

He felt that same shame welling up inside him now in the gray dawn and mixed in with the rotgut whisky he had been drinking all night, it nauseated him and he had to swallow back the slime that came up into his mouth with a bitter taste. For a long moment he was too sick to call back. If he had opened his mouth he would have vomited.

"Hosea! Answer me! If that be you, Son, speak up like a man"

"Save that hell's fire and brimstone," gritted Hosey Whitehead under his breath, "for your gospel suckers!" But sick as he was he thought he could detect a note of harsh alarm in the preacher's voice.

"The old fool musta stumbled onto something—somebody's been blabbin' to him," thought Hosey to himself.

FEAR iced through him at the dread thought of it. He would have turned back right now but the circuit rider had the eye of an eagle. Hosey's horse nickered and the gray mule lifted his head and commenced braying, filling the gray dawn with the blatant sound. The stuff was off, now.

"Yes, sir!" Hosey made his voice sound as hale and hearty as he could. "I'll be there, directly I get the chores done."

Hosey rode over to the horse trough below the windmill and dismounted.

He was a six foot, rawboned man in his early twenties with a shock of hair the pale color of new hard twist saddle rope. His California pants were shoved Texas style into a pair of new shop-made boots that were now dusty and scuffed and dark spotted with dried blood. His new red flannel shirt was torn across the shoulder seam and the back of it dirtied. He yanked his hat off and shoved his head in the deep horse trough, using his hands to wash the dirt and dried blood crust from his battered face and hair, and bathing his swollen bloodshot blue eyes. The sting of the cold water on the raw bruises brought back the shameful memory of last night's cowardice on his part. Hosey blamed the man who sired him for the cowardice within him. With a psalm singing father who preached about turning the other cheek, what more could be expected of his son.

"I quit! Don't beat me up no more! I got a plenty! Lemme up!" The dull memory of his shameful whipping came back. He straightened his lame back and dried his face with the front of his shirt tail.

"I'll get that Wade Kirby" He rinsed out his mouth and spat. "And when I get him, it'll be for keeps. Nobody can whip me and live to brag about it," he mumbled vengefully.

He worked the pump handle and brought fresh water up from the well and splashed it into a big tin dipper. He rinsed and gargled the taste of stale booze out of his mouth, cleaning it for the time being until his sour breath would bring back the stench of last night's debauchery and the bitter taste of humiliation and shame. Hosey Whitehead felt mighty sorry for himself right now.

For a boy who had to grow up in the Montana cow country, to be the only son of a circuit rider preacher who rode a gray mule, was humiliating and degrading. Other kids were named Tom, Dick and even Harry, and their fathers

rode good horses and packed six-shooters instead of a Bible. Matthew Whitehead was the only man in that part of the cow country who did not own his own brand. He owned land and the first water rights to the creek he had named Jordan Creek, after the river Jordan in the Holy Land.

He had it all under fence and planted in alfalfa and timothy and bluejoint. He had a large truck garden where he grew his own spuds and turnips and cabbage. He expected his son to plow and harrow and seed and reap the harvest. Hosea, the plowboy! A clod-hopper scissorbill farmer. A hayseed. "Where's your biboveralls, Hosea? Ain't that horse you ride to school got collar marks, Hosey?" In this way the kids would torment him.

Wade Kirby had always ridden a green bronc to school. When he finished school, Wade rode the rough string for the Bear Paw Pool. The other kids were all from cow ranches, and later on cowhands in their own rights.

No cow outfit would give Hosey a job punching cows. Not even a horse wrangler's job. So he had to make his own job. And build up his own tough rep as a two-bit horse thief and cattle thief. He had inherited his father's giant build and he used it as best he knew how to bully smaller men and whip them until he increased his following of men of his own type. Backed by the small petty gang who took his orders, Hosey Whitehead did his night riding.

"Tough as a preacher's son!" he would say when he beat some man down to the ground. He had heard the expression or read it somewhere in a book and palmed it off as his own coinage. "Tough as a preacher's son!"

Lately he had been cashing in on it. During the two months his father had been gone, Hosey had gloried in his toughness—until he and his gang had broken up the 'breed dance on Lodge Pole Creek last night. His gang had

counted on him. He had taken a beating from a man half his size and weight. Compared to the giant Hosey, Wade Kirby looked like a sawed-off, hammered down runt. When Hosey had begged for mercy, Wade had let him up and tossed him back the pearl handled six-shooter he had taken away from him.

WADE had stood there, bowed legs braced, short, heavy set, a flat grin on his square, blunt featured face, his short wiry black hair sweat matted, his gray blue eyes mocking.

"Feel lucky, Hosey?" Wade's voice was quiet.

Hosey had shoved the gun into the waistband of his soiled pants and turned away. He mounted his horse and headed for home. Wade had, no doubt, thought Hosey, washed off and gone back in to dance with Jackie Dufrense, the black haired, black eyed Canadian Cree girl, Frenchy Dufrense's oldest daughter. Hosey knew his gang would no longer take his orders.

Today was the day Frenchy had told Hosey to bring the three stolen yearlings he had in the barn, over to his place at the foot of Haystack Butte. Frenchy was crooked as snake tracks and his ranch was a stopping place for men like Horse Thief Deevers and his kind along the horse thief trail that crossed the Missouri River at Cow Island.

Now the circuit rider was back and like as not he was home to stay for a while. The shock of seeing the gray mule had a sobering effect on Hosey. For despite the fact that Matthew Whitehead was a man of prayer and peace, Hosey was afraid of his father and his righteous anger. It was like the Wrath of God that he preached about.

As he did his chores around the barn, Hosey could see his father pacing slowly up and down the wide porch, his head bare, with his mane of gray hair, bowed, his heavy chin sunk on his massive chest, his hands locked behind his

long back, cracking his big knuckles. He still wore his rusty black swallow-tail coat with the tail pocket sagged by the eternal weight of his shabby black leather Bible, heavy farmer boots clumping with each slow stride. His face was like roughly chiseled dark gray granite, with a jutting nose and craggy forehead and deepset eyes that were blue as a rain washed sky. A deep lined face was like roughly chiseled dark gray turn black as a cold winter sky and hard for a guilty man to look into.

No light showed in the big log house that Matthew Whitehead had built with his own giant strength and large calloused hands. No smoke came from the cold chimney. The house had a forbidding look despite the fact it was called a Gospel House, and the man who strode with long steps the length of the porch and back, was a strange, stern, forbidding man.

Hosey dreaded the meeting with his circuit rider father. He kept putting off the greeting of father and son. He prowled the barn for any evidence of his own sins, such as an empty bottle hid under the hay, or a deck of cards shoved in behind a can of axle grease and horse medicine on the shelf in the harness room. He found a half filled pint hidden in the manger and hesitated about pulling the cork. He needed a drink badly to give him false courage to meet his father. He finally twisted the cork and tilted the bottle. He had his back to the door and a big swallow of the raw rotgut in his throat when a sound came from behind him and a dark shadow filled the harness room door. He choked and whirled around and his black clad father stood there.

For a long hushed moment the two men, father and son, stood eying one another as rank strangers who had nothing on earth in common, at cross-purposes. Hatred, borne of outraged feelings, was there in the ugly tense moment, and the bottle in Hosey's hand became a weapon. The circuit rider's huge hands, half closed like blunt, big jointed talons, were half raised like

they were about to close on the younger man's throat.

The father read the fear of him in the bloodshot eyes of his son. His flared nostrils clogged with the whisky stench of the younger man's sinful lust and contamination that was against his preachings. The big hands clenched into fists, then unclenched slowly as the long arms dropped to his side. He let out a low toned sound that came from behind his clenched lips and was wrrenched from his tortured insides.

Hosey could see only the fanatical glitter in the circuit rider's bleak eyes. Matthew Whitehead never smoked, drank liquor, or cursed, and he looked upon dancing as a cardinal sin. To his son's way of thinking he was loco crazy as a raving maniac. His father was worse than a stranger to his son. The youth was afraid of him and the fear went back beyond the boy's first memory. Matthew Whitehead had put the brand of fear on the heart of his son so that he was afraid of all men and had to overcome the fear within him when he met a man. Hosey knew he had that fear without knowing why it was inside his being.

BUT Matthew Whitehead, for all his God fearing preaching, had never seen that fear inside his son. It was beyond his limited comprehension to understand. Beyond the printed words of the Bible, he was an un-read man. The limp leather black binding of the Book of God acted as the hidebound limitations of his knowledge and understanding. And because he was uneducated, self taught, he did not understand the real or the Biblical allegorical meaning of the quotations from the scriptures. He quoted in a sonorous voice, word for word, and with gross mispronunciation of many words, arms flailing in gesticulation, without any self-understanding of the Bible from which he quoted.

Matthew Whitehead saw in his own flesh and blood son, so alike him in phys-

ical being, all the corruption and evil that fouled the earth. It showed in the battered face and the bloodshot eyes and the stench of rotgut booze. In the eyes of the circuit rider he saw the devil possessing his son. All the sinful and lustful urges that the father had choked and stifled within himself, he saw outcropping in his son made in his own image. And it mocked the man who preached the word of God.

Hosea Whitehead saw the look in his father's fanatical eyes, and the stern granite face drain bloodless to the color of dead flesh. When the preacher advanced a step, his huge fist raised, Hosey was powerless to move. The big fist struck the bottle in his hand but he had a tigh grip on its neck and still held what was left of the broken bottle, a sharp jagged glass weapon. Then Matthew Whitehead began beating the devil who possessed his son out from within his soul, and the boy fought back at him as best he knew how, his only thought being to escape from the small harness room. Stark fear of the older man overcame the cowardice within him. As they fought the circuit rider called upon Almighty God to wrest Satan's being from within his son, and the small room inside the barn reverberated with his deep toned bellow. Hosey used the name of God to out-bellow his father and curse him.

Harness and horse collars hanging on wooden pegs were jerked down. Chain traces, with heavy links, clanged like metallic symbols in fit accompaniment to the crashing battle. Within the twelve foot square room waged the battle of two giants, the name of God clashing in prayer and blasphemy.

The three yearling colts tied in their stalls, terrified by the sounds that came from the harness room, fought their halter ropes, rearing back, striking, pawing and squealing.

Outside, the rising sun pushed slowly above the skyline in a crimson streaked dawn that was the color of blood on a gray blanket.

II

FRENCHY DUFRENSE rode up out of the red dawn. Hosey had promised Frenchy to bring the three yearlings, which he claimed were halter broken and had no brand on their sleek hides, over to his place this morning. But Frenchy's daughter Jacqueline, called Jackie, had brought back word from the 'breed dance that Hosey and Wade Kirby had gotten into a fight over her, to see who would ride home with her, and Hosey had been beaten up. Frenchy figured Hosey would be in no shape to deliver the yearlings.

Jackie had taken a girl's pride in her conquest until her father had commenced cussing her out in a jargon of French Canadian, Cree and Montana country lingo.

"*Oui*, by gar, you get rid of dat Wade Kirby, *tout suite*, before he finds hees carcass in de Missouri River with his throat cut. Take off dem red ribbons and de red slippers and put on de apron and de moccasins, or, by gar, I'll cut off your long hair and make you de boy I want for a son de night you was born. Dat Wade Kirby he works for de Bear Paw Pool and, what you theenk, he is paid to keep de eye on Frenchy. *Sacré bleu!*

"Dat Hosey, he's all right. He'll dreenk de whisky Frenchy make to sell. He'll pay with the horses he'll bring and put in de barn before daylight. And you, Jackee, you make de fool out of dat Hosey. You smile with de red lips han wink de eye, and, by gar, you raise de hell among de yearlin's!"

With Horse Thief Deevers due to cross the river at Frenchy's Crossing, Frenchy made the ride to the circuit rider's place. He rode up and in behind a thick clump of high buckbrush. A weasel eyed, shriveled man with graying black hair and mustache and goatee. Leathery faced, wiry, sharp eyed. He listened to what sounded like the wrecking of the barn inside. Screams and curses and the rattle of chains and then a silence.

Frenchy waited for the sight of Hosey Whitehead.

Hosey came stumbling like a drunk man out of the barn, his torn clothes spattered with blood and a broken bottle gripped in his hand. Sodden with sweat and smeared with blood. Winded, stumbling on his way to the water trough, a crazy laugh coming from his gaping mouth and a sobbing sound underneath that fool's laughter.

Crazy drunk, figured Frenchy Dufrense, and fighting with the green broncs he'd been halter breaking. He looked like he had been kicked and trampled underfoot.

Frenchy rode out from behind the brush, a sly grin on his weazened face and a bottle of rotgut he peddled in his hand. He waited for Hosey to pull his head up out of the water trough.

"By gar, Hosey, you look like de man who try to tame de she wild-cat!" said Frenchy.

Hosey stared at the man on horseback, glassy eyed, shaking like he was coming down with chills and fever. Frenchy shoved the bottle at him and Hosey took it in his two hands and began gulping it down like water. He choked and took the bottle away from his mouth.

"I come for de horses, Hosey," Frenchy said.

The rotgut tended to sober Hosey up, rather than make him drunk. It cleared his brain and brought back the shock of what he had done. He would have to go slow, think before he said anything. He had just killed a man and he had to cover up the murder tracks.

"Get away from here before the circuit rider catches sight of you, Frenchy!" Hosey spoke in a harsh rasping whisper.

"Dat dam' circuit rider, he's home?" asked Frenchy.

"Yeah. He got home last night. Plumb tuckered out and sound asleep. Dead to the world," Hosey added.

Frenchy Dufrense hated Matthew Whitehead, for he feared the man like he

feared no other human. It dated back to the time when Matthew had ridden up on his mule and found Frenchy passing a jug of whisky to some drunken half-breeds in his saloon. The preacher had made a shambles of the place, smashing two kegs of whisky and breaking every bottle and whisky glass. He had wound up his righteous anger by tossing the drunken 'breeds and Frenchy with them into the river and holding them under the water until they were half drowned and cold, shivering, waterlogged sober.

Hosey pointed to the big gray mule in the feed yard and watched Frenchy's beady black eyes swivel.

"Ride back to where Jordan Creek forks and wait for me. I'll bring the horses. I'm goin' down the trail with Horse Thief Deevers. I'm quittin' the country, and I'm takin' all my horses along. Not get the hell gone before the circuit rider comes alive!"

Frenchy lost no time at all, taking his sudden departure.

HOSEY watched him out of sight. He dreaded going back into the barn. The thought of his father lying sprawled on his back and the blood still flowing from the jagged cuts of the broken bottle, made Hosey shudder. He took another big drink and went back into the barn before the effects of the whisky could die out.

He took a look inside the harness room. The circuit rider still lay there in the litter of horse collars and chain harness. Hosey shut the door of the harness room and shot the bolt to lock it.

He led the big colts out and turned them into the pasture with the half dozen saddle horses he had acquired. He saddled a fresh horse and stuffed some clean clothes and whatever else he needed into a canvas bean sack and tied the bulging sack on his saddle. He turned the gray mule into the horse pasture where there was feed and water. Then he drove the loose horses out through the lower gate.

Hosey loped back to the barn and took

a final look inside at the empty stalls and the closed bolted door of the harness room. Cold sweat had broken out to bathe his hide in a clammy chill. He reached for the barn lantern that hung on a wooden peg near the open doorway and climbed up the ladder into the hayloft. His hands trembled as he unscrewed the cap to the kerosene well and poured the kerosene over the loose hay and tossed the lantern in on the hay. He broke several matches in his haste to get one lit. He touched the match flame to the hay and watched it roar into flame. Then he crawled down the ladder and ran, stumbling in his haste, to where he had left his saddle horse. He was blowing like a winded runner as he mounted, the sweat running down his battered face.

He rode off at a long lope, looking backwards across his shoulder to watch the smoke. He thought he heard the circuit rider's bellow and jerked in the saddle like he had been jabbed in the back by a knife, letting out a sharp cry as he reined up, listening. But only the loud blatant braying of the big gray mule sounded. His eyes stared back at the thick smoke and jets of flame showing through. Panic gripped him and he dug his spurs deep and headed away at a run.

He picked up the loose horses before they had time to scatter and drove them along the trail. Frenchy was waiting for him at the forks of Jordan Creek. He was scowling and his beady black eyes were sharp as the eyes of a weasel. He looked past Hosey and towards the thick column of smoke two miles away.

"He didn't wake up, dat damn circuit rider?" Frenchy asked.

"No." Hosey's face was the color of wet putty underneath the bruises.

Frenchy pointed to a lone rider headed for the column of gray-black smoke that rose in the sky. He was traveling the wagon trail that led from Frenchman's Crossing on the Missouri River. It was too far to make out the horse or rider.

"Dere is dat Wade Kirby," Frenchy

said. He had a full quart and was working the cork out with the long pointed blade of his knife.

"How the hell do you know?" Hosey croaked, a look of fear and hate in his bloodshot eyes.

Frenchy held the cork and shoved the bottle at the circuit rider's son. Hosey grabbed it and spilled some of the whiskey down his chin. Frenchy took the

hup and made de prairie fire. Me and you, Hosey, we get dees ponies to Frenchman's Crossin'. My squaw will tell dose fellers dat Hosey was at my place when de circuit rider ranch burn down." Frenchy had a habit of screwing his face to one side and winking an eye.

"Me, I'm makin' de one guess. Dat Wade Kirby set de fire dat burn down the ranch. *Compre?*"

The Pee-wee Boot



IN 1905 A BUNCH of cowboys took themselves a little pascear to South America to indulge in a little roping competition. Let it be said with pride that they ran rings around the South American gauchos. They made a lot of money too, in prizes, but those canny South Americanos weren't letting much of that cash mazuma get out of the country. So there was always a law or a violation which the American cowboys fractured and the fines gobbled up their prize money faster than they made it.

Now when a yearling was roped, the roper always ran down the string, caught the animal by one ear, and by the flank with the other hand, and

threw him. Some of these yearlings were very bouncy and, pitching about, would ram a hoof down the cowboy's boot top and split it. Thus at the end of the trip the boys came home covered with glory, but broke and with their boots ripped and ragged. This would never do, so they cut off the jagged tops and ran some rawhide around the edges to lace them.

When the returning heroes came stomping into Old Sol's Lone Wolf Saloon, in Carlsbad, New Mexico, the crowd was upset by the unconventional footgear.

"Why you look plumb nekkid!" they roared. "Where'd you get the pee-wee boots?"

"Why these is all the rage now!" the liars roared back.

So the crowd went home and whacked off the tops of their own boots. And the style has stuck and now no self-respecting cowboy would be caught dead in the old high styles.

—Sam Brant

bottle away and wiped the neck off on the front of his buckskin shirt and took a drink. He corked the bottle and shoved it back in his saddle pocket.

His beady eyes read what was in Hosey's mind, and his sharp white teeth bared. He shrugged his shoulders and slowly shook his head.

"Bimeby," he said. "Plenty men come to put out dat fire before de wind come

Frenchy Dufrense, outcast from Canada where he had had a hand in the Riel Rebellion, was always quick to pick up sign, and make the most of what he found by twisting and bending it in his direction.

The sign over the door of his log cabin store at Frenchman's Crossing read TRADING POST. The shelves along the inside walls held all manner of trade

goods. Bolts of cloth and spools of gay colored ribbons and silk thread. Gay colored beads to be sewn on buckskin for the Indian and 'breed trade. Men's clothing and tobacco. Jackie Dufrense ran the store and dressed herself from the dry goods shelves. She was a lithe slim girl with blue black hair and red lips and long lashed black eyes that lighted up whenever a likely looking man stepped in the store.

FRENCHY'S Cree squaw did the cooking. She spoke nothing but the Indian language and then only when she was spoken to first. She savvied English and French and could speak either language which she had learned at the Jesuit Mission north of the Canadian line. Frenchy had taught her silence since the day he had bought her from her Cree father. At the same time he taught her to listen well and remember all she overheard and she had overheard and seen plenty.

At night, when men of all sorts gathered inside the log saloon, the Cree squaw would squat in behind the brush outside an open window and sometimes stay there all night long, smoking a mixture of ground up kinnikinnik berries mixed with cut plug tobacco, the willow stem of a Hudson's Bay trade pipe held in her mouth, nursing a pint of rotgut whisky she had swiped from Frenchy's wicker demijohn under his bunk. And sometimes she overheard talk on the outside that she purposely forgot to tell Frenchy next morning.

The womenfolk ate in the kitchen. Frenchy and the men he invited to his table ate at a long oilcloth covered table in the dining room and the meals were four-bits a throw. All a man could eat, washed down with strong black coffee. Beef, venison and catfish.

Frenchy ran a ferryboat big enough to hold twenty head of horses. He ran the ferry and tended his saloon. And the wide, swift and sometimes muddy Missouri River held its secrets concerning the renegades and stolen horses that

were ferried across. When whisky tempers flared at night and guns were pulled and steel knife blades flashed, there might sound a loud splash that would ripple the black water in the night, and there would be one more secret for the undercurrent to whisper to the high clay and shale cutbanks that the water gnawed and deposited on the sand bars below. Bits of bone, nibbled clean by the catfish, were hidden by the debris and waterlogged cottonwood and white driftwood sticks lodged against some beaver dam. Catfish and suckers and muskrats were the scavengers.

When a mortal scream shattered the night's silence, Frenchy's squaw would tell her awakened frightened children that it was the scream of a mountain lion on the prowl. There at Frenchman's Crossing the coyotes and wolves lifted their mournful howl in requiem for missing men.

III

HOSEY and Frenchy swam the loose horses across the river a quarter mile below the ferry crossing and below the bend, and followed them across in the late afternoon. They came ashore on the south side of the river in a fenced in pasture where about a hundred horses grazed.

As the riders splashed ashore, a man rode from behind the red willows that grew twenty feet or more tall. A lean, red haired, red whiskered, freckled six-footer, who sat his saddle with his weight in his left stirrup and held a short barreled saddle carbine in the crook of his arm, his finger on the trigger and his thumb on the hammer. The gun was pointed at Frenchy and Hosey, seeming to cover them both. A pair of squinted glass green eyes watched both men with wary coldness.

"You ought to know better by this time, Frenchy." The man spoke in a flat toned voice that carried a threat, "Shovin' them horses across in broad daylight."

Frenchy shrugged and he bared his sharp teeth at the red whiskered Horse Thief Deevers.

"He'll go along, dis Hosey," Frenchy told the man, "when you pull out to-night."

"I ain't that short-handed, Frenchy." The horse thief grinned flatly. "Listen, I don't want that circuit rider cuttin' for sign when he hunts his son who's turned up missin'. I can name you four-five fellers doin' time in the Deer Lodge pen, repentin' their sins while they're a-makin' horsehair bridles, on account of that circuit rider preacher turnin' 'em over to the law. I don't want nothin' to do with Hosey Whitehead. And no part of his old man." He eyed Hosey as if he smelled bad.

"Looks like, by now, you'd learn to keep your big mouth shut and do the listenin', Hosey," he said.

"They ganged up on me," said Hosey sullenly, "at the 'breed dance last night."

"I heard it different. If you had just a little of the sand your old man's got, Hosey, you'd do to take along," said Horse Thief Deevers.

"Mebbeso he's got plenty guts, Deevers." Frenchy twisted his face into a sly grin and winked at the man.

"That I got to see proved." Horse Thief Deevers chuckled mirthlessly. "You can peddle your overnight rotgut, Frenchy, for five-year-old, aged in the wood stuff, but you can't sell me Hosey Whitehead for a tough hand who'll play his string out."

Horse Thief Deevers shoved his carbine back into its saddle scabbard, and reined his horse off.

"I'll settle up for three yearlin's to-night, Frenchy." His green eyes looked at Hosey. "I can't use them other horses you fetched along. I'm leavin' the circuit rider's horses here in Frenchy's pasture."

Frenchy motioned to Hosey and headed up the river for his place. Hosey followed along like a sulking kid.

It was the same old story. Nobody wanted anything to do with a preacher's

son. Even a low-down horse thief like Deevers told him so to his face, calling him a coward.

"He's scared, dat Deevers," Frenchy grinned as he opened the gate. "One time dat preacher ride into dat Deevers horse thief camp where he is holding de stolen ponies. 'Thou shalt not steal!' dat preacher say in de beeg voice. 'Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's horses.' De circuit rider grabbed Deevers, lift him high, and take him by de collar and de seat of de pants and tip him upside down. He shake heem till de teeth rattle and de face go black and den de circuit rider throw heem in de river over de beeg cut bank. By gar, he's one strong man, dat circuit rider!"

Frenchy closed the wire gate and got on his horse. It was the first time Hosey had heard about it. But he had wondered why the horses he had run off and sold to Deevers for a few dollars were back in the horse pastures where they belonged. No wonder Horse Thief Deevers wanted no part of Hosey Whitehead. Big and stalwart and hard muscled as he was, Hosey felt lame in every bone from the mauling his father had given him while he was stabbing and slashing at his face and shoulders and chest with the jagged edged broken bottle. The whisky was dying out and he was feeling sick and scared again.

They put up their horses at the barn and Hosey untied his warsack and headed for the river bank. He stripped to the hide and waded into the cold water with a bar of yellow laundry soap. He lathered himself all over and splashed around in the cold water until the lather was washed off and he had worked up enough circulation to take the chill off. By the time he had dried himself on a rough towel he was sober. He put on clean clothes and threw his torn blood spattered discarded clothes into the river. It was almost dark by the time he got back to the saloon.

TWO horse thieves who took orders from Deevers were drinking with Frenchy, while a third stood guard out-

side the saloon. Deevers was in the store, leaning across the counter with a grin on his red whiskered face, joshing and laughing with Jackie.

Hosey stood back in the shadow, watching them through the window. He was half crouched behind the brush and he had a six-shooter in his hand, and he was shivering a little.

He whirled around when somebody touched his back, and choked back a sharp outcry behind clenched teeth. But there was nothing to be afraid of. It was only a slim girl about seventeen in a clean gingham dress and moccasins on her bare feet. Brown legged, freckles sprinkled across her nose. Her skin was a shade or two darker than that of her older sister Jackie and her eyes were dark amber instead of black.

She was called Fawn and aptly named. She had been born without the power of speech, but it had not blighted her hearing. Fawn was shy as some wild spotted white tailed fawn. She used the Indian sign language taught her by her Cree mother. Whenever there was the least sign of violence at Frenchman's Crossing, Fawn would slip into the brush and disappear. She had a way with all wild animals and birds, and she had her own hiding place back in the badlands, a large cave over which silver tip grizzly and mountain lion fought for possession.

Fawn put her hand on Hosey's gun and smiled timidly and shook her head. Her two heavy braids hung down, squaw fashion, below her waist. Hosey put away the gun and she took his hand and led him down a dim trail that twisted through the tall chokeberry bushes. They halted in the shadow and stood close together while her slim hands moved deftly in the sign language which Hosey understood. The top of her sleek black head came no higher than his shoulder and her hair had a clean odor. She had to tilt her head to meet his eyes and her lips moved with each gesture, forming the words mutely.

This timid half-breed girl was the only human on earth who believed in

Hosey Whitehead. It showed in her amber eyes that were shadowed with dread and fear for him. Her warning warned him far better than Frenchy's rotgut. In her eyes he was a tow-headed hero with a lion's courage and strength. When they were alone Hosey was not ashamed to reveal the softer, better side of his real nature, like his love for a horse or a dog or the wild animals and birds that men often killed for the sake of killing.

ALWAYS, right up to now, this very minute, Hosey had always treated Fawn with a sort of sexless tolerance. Now for the first time he looked down at her and found she was a girl, budding into womanhood. He found her beautiful, far more beautiful than Jackie with her cruel red-lipped smile and mocking black eyes. Fawn's heart showed in her eyes and he felt an aching lump choking his throat. He took the black braids in either hand and coiled them clumsily at the nape of her neck like Jackie wore her hair and his bruised lips smiled as he let the braids uncoil. Fawn's lips were warm and ready when he kissed her.

When her arms reached up, something hard and terribly bitter inside him melted and broke and spilled its warmth through him. He did not know that tears were in his eyes until she brushed them with her cheek. They were tears of shame and he could not quite understand them. All he knew right now was that he had killed his own father, and the shock of what he had done now flooded out of him in shame and regret and grief. It was too late now to undo what he had done in drunken terrified anger. He could still see the blood as it flowed across the gray granite face of his father and the look in the man's eyes—a shocked, horrified look that blamed not his son but himself in that moment of his dying.

Hosey's arms fell away from Fawn and he took a step away. When she looked up at him puzzled, he could not use his hands, the hands that had murdered his father, to tell her.

"I killed my father, Fawn." His voice was a croaking whisper in the night. "I cut him to pieces with a broken whisky bottle in the harness room of the barn. Then I set fire to the barn to burn the guilt of my murder. I am not fit to touch you with my murderer's hands."

He saw her face turn white and the freckles stand out black across her nose and her amber eyes darken like the shadow of death had passed across them. Then her hand went across his mouth and her eyes cut darting glances behind him into the black shadows.

A dry twig snapped with startling loudness and the leaves rustled as somebody backed away in the silence that followed the eavesdropper's stealthy departure, Hosey's eyes questioned her.

"It was only your mother?" His lips formed the words soundlessly.

FAWN shook her head. Her hands moved and Hosey knew that it was Frenchy who had slipped out of the saloon and had followed them.

Hosey knew that Fawn was afraid of her father, that she despised and detested Frenchy and the lawless life he led. She loathed the touch of his hand and she had only contempt, never any sort of envy, for her older sister Jackie, who flirted with all men.

Her hands reached out and clutched one of Hosey's clenched fists and clung to it as she unclenched the fingers and held it against her tear stained cheek. Then she tugged at him, and he followed her along the trail that led to her cave. Frenchy called his name from the doorway of his log cabin saloon.

"Halloo, Hosey! You better come damn quick. Deever's has changed his mind. He's takin' you along, by gar!"

Hosey and Fawn stood there close together, gripped by the same dread fear of the squawman Frenchy, unable to shake off the nameless power of evil he had held over them since they could remember. The habit of all their youthful years was too strong to be discarded now and they both knew it.

"I have to do what Frenchy tells me." Hosey said. "He has me over the barrel."

"I know." Her hands moved swiftly. "I will be hidden somewhere. I think it is some kind of a trick Frenchy and Deever's is playing on you. I will be watching. If you die, then I want to go with you. If you escape with your life, take me with you. We will go away together." Fawn smiled.

"Where?"

"To my mother's people. The Crees. In the Sweet Grass Hills, across the Canadian line. Hold me tight now—tighter." Her lips clung to his bruised mouth for a long moment and then she pushed away and was gone along the dim trail, her moccasins making no sound.

Hosey walked back slowly towards Frenchy who stood in the doorway of the saloon, the smoky lamplight behind him. A weazened, weasel-eyed man of evil with his sharp teeth bared.

"Hosey, you are fine man!" His whisky breath fouled the clean air. "It is good job when you kill dat damn circuit rider and burn de barn, by gar. Me, Frenchy, I nevaire tell de secret." His face screwed up sideways and one evil wicked beady black eye squinted shut. "Unless, by gar, you act like de rabbit."

Hosey could see Horse Thief Deever's and his men lined up at the bar, passing the bottle. Frenchy led the way to the store where Jackie was standing in front of the mirror at the back of the store where the office was, tying a red ribbon around her hair. She turned and gave Hosey her red lipped smile and her hand stroked one side of his battered face before he could jerk his head away. She laughed mockingly and shrugged her bare shoulders that showed above the sleeveless red dress.

"Get paper and pen and ink," her father told her in French. "Write what I tell you."

Jackie wrote swiftly, keeping up with Frenchy's careful dictation, translating his French into English as she wrote. It was a bill of sale to the circuit rider's

ranch. Land, water rights, all improvements and livestock. Jackie dipped the pen in the inkwell and handed it to Hosey.

"Sign there, your full name, Hosea Whitehead," she said. "I'll sign as witness. And the squaw will put her mark." Her black eyes mocked him.

Jackie always referred to her mother as the squaw. She used her powder puff to whiten her dark textured skin and claimed she was French Canadian. Frenchy went along with her on the fabrication of the lie that claimed Frenchy had married a French Canadian girl in Quebec and her mother had died, and that Frenchy married the Cree squaw to look after his baby Jacqueline. She called Fawn a half-breed brat. She refused to speak Cree and her well kept hands never talked the Indian sign language. Jackie was Frenchy's daughter and an eager pupil of his evil teachings.

Hosey Whitehead looked at the half-breed girl, and he seemed to actually see her for the first time, the cruel twist to her red-lipped smile and the opaque black of her eyes that held no warmth. It was a long searching look and Jackie's almost heavy black eyebrows knitted in a scowl. He took the pen from her hand.

Frenchy was standing behind him, his beady eyes watching his every move, the sharp point of his knife blade touching Hosey's spine. Hosey half turned and looked down at the knife, then into the beady black eyes and he read murder in them.

HOSEY could see Horse Thief Deevers standing in the doorway, a grin on his red whiskered face and his eyes narrowed to green slits. Deevers had a six-shooter in his hand. He hooked a forefinger through the trigger-guard and commenced spinning the gun, thumbing back the hammer and letting it down with each slow spin. A half smoked brown paper cigarette hung from the corner of the grin, the smoke drifting from his nostrils and from between his

teeth. Every time the gun would click, Frenchy winced and blinked his eyes. Jackie's red lipped smile was a frozen grimace.

"It ain't like you, Frenchy, to leave a bottle settin' on the bar," said Deevers. "You don't give away a drink without you get something back." His green eyes looked at Jackie. He spat out the short stub of cigarette on the pineboard floor, still damp from the squaw's mop.

"You and your squawman pappy aimin' to deal Deevers out on this, 'breed gal? And me and you sweethearts, and all?" The horse thief's laugh had a brittle sound.

"Never sign anything before you read it, Hosey," Deevers said. "For all you know you're signin' your death warrant."

"How did you know, Deevers?" Hosey backed against the long counter so he could face Frenchy and Deevers. That left only the 'breed girl behind the counter and near his back. He had the unsigned bill of sale in his hand, the pen with the ink drying in the other. Hosey's bloodshot eyes looked bleak.

"Supposin' you ask Frenchy," said Deevers, "about the deal he made with me in regard to a feller named Hosey Whitehead, if I took you along and lost you for keeps along the horse thief trail."

"*Sacré!*" Frenchy spat it out. He swore in French and palmed the long bladed knife in his hand. He had an ugly reputation as a knife thrower. He was said to be deadly and fast with a gun.

"This thing in my hand is hair-triggered, Frenchy," Deevers warned him. "It's pointed your direction. It wouldn't pay to crowd your luck." He spoke to Jackie without taking his green eyed stare from her squawman father. Jackie was rolling a cigarette, licking the paper with a pointed red tongue.

"Frenchy throwed you in for boot, sweetheart. I got a notion to give you back. Supposin' you read me what you wrote on that paper you handed Hosey.

And don't tell me you can't read your own handwritin'."

Hosey saw the stricken look in Jackie's black eyes when she held out her hand for the bill of sale. He knew she would burn it up with the match flame she held to the cigarette in her mouth.

"I'll read it, Deevers," said Hosey flatly, and watched the bitter hate glint in the 'breed girl's eyes. He moved away from her as she tossed away the burnt match and her hand slid in under the counter where Frenchy kept a .38 snub-nosed gun.

IV

WATCHING her covertly, Hosey read the bill of sale made out to Frenchy Dufrense. His voice was toneless, devoid of any trace of fear.

"Take 'er easy, sweetheart," said Deevers flatly. "Let go of that gun you got hold of or your squaw mother will be moppin' Frenchy's blood off the clean floor. If you don't think Deevers plays for keeps, play your hand out."

Jackie's empty hand came into sight. "You got the deal, Deevers. Let's see what you can do with it."

"Dip that pen you got in the inkwell, Hosey. Scratch out Frenchy Dufrense's name and write in Dan Deevers. Then sign it and Frenchy and Jackie will sign for witnesses."

"It will still be my death warrant, won't it?" Hosey tore the bill of sale to bits and the paper fluttered down on the floor.

He knew that Fawn was hidden somewhere outside, watching all that went on inside the store, and it gave him a courage he had never felt until now.

"Who's got the deal, now?" Hosey asked and forced a grin.

For a long moment nobody broke the uneasy silence. Then Jackie spoke. "I didn't know you had it in you, Hosey." The red lipped smile left her eyes opaque as black agate. "Keep on like that and I could change my mind about a lot of things."

"I beat you to it, Jackie," Hosey said.

"*Oui*, by gar," Frenchy spoke sharply. "I hear what dat Hosey tell Fawn. I watch from de brush and see dem mak' de love. She's got de big joke on you, Jackee."

Deevers short laugh brought Jackie's red lips back from her white teeth in a snarl. Her hand darted beneath the counter and came up with the gun. "Take his gun, Frenchy. Put away that six-shooter you're playin' with, Deevers, before I put a hole in you. We're holdin' court over at the saloon. I'll give that dummy 'breed brat somethin' to weep about. You know how to tie a hangman's knot, Deevers?"

"I can sure try, sweetheart, if it don't fit my own neck," he said.

"We'll try it on the preacher's son for fit," Jackie said. "There's a kiss in it if it does the job, my red muzzled friend."

"Make it two with some huggin' throwed in and I'll shave."

"It's a deal, Deevers. But don't bother to shave. I like whiskers. I know that a he-man's been scratchin' my face, not a bald-faced overgrown kid."

Hosey felt the sharp point of the knife sticking into his back as Frenchy took his gun.

"She's de kangaroo court, by gar." His chuckle rattled in Hosey's ears. "Long time, now, since we hold de kangaroo court, eh, Jackee?"

Strange tales were told about the kangaroo courts held at Frenchman's Crossing. You could believe all you heard or take it with the proverbial grain of salt. For the most part the stories took a ludicrous twist with a lot of rough horseplay thrown in.

A guilty man would be fined drinks for the house, or a ducking in the river. If it was winter, the guilty man would be shoved through an open airhole in the ice, then yanked out and left for his wet clothes to freeze on his back with the danger of freezing to death or dying of pneumonia. Or if Frenchy was in the right humor the guilty man was made to

stand with his back to the door and Frenchy threw butcher knives at him that Jackie brought from the store.

If a man was found guilty of forcing his drunken attentions on Jackie, she would do the knife throwing herself. If two men quarreled over Jackie, a duel was arranged. They would fight a rough and tumble fight and no holds barred. Or Jackie would give them the gay colored knitted yarn Hudson's Bay sash from around her slim waist, giving each man one end and placing a skinning knife in each man's hand.

Hosey Whitehead knew what was in store for him when they led him into the saloon and told Deevers to send his men back to the horse pasture to guard the stolen horses. Frenchy and Jackie wanted no witness, except Deevers, to the kangaroo court that tried Hosey Whitehead.

When the three men and the girl were alone, Jackie dropped the heavy canvas blinds down across the two windows and told Hosey to shut the door.

"Take the prisoner's chair." Jackie pointed to a barroom chair Frenchy had placed against the log wall.

THE door of the saloon faced the river and Hosey could see the big flat bottomed canoe that was the ferryboat, tied to the bank, and the reflection of the moonlight on the river, giving the water a metallic sheen. He caught a brief glimpse of Fawn crouched in the shadow of the brush. Then he looked out at the river a hundred yards away, figuring quickly in his mind that if he could cross the clearing and dive into the river, he could swim under water with the swift current and beyond gunshot before he surfaced for air. His hand gripped the edge of the door and he tensed. It would take but a second to slam the door behind him and make a run for it. Then his eyes stared, fixed.

A big gray mule stood there, hock deep in the water alongside the ferryboat. The circuit rider's gray mule, without saddle or bridle.

Hosey paled as if he had seen a ghost—tensed, taut nerved.

"Make up de mind, Hosey!" Frenchy chuckled. "De knife, she's plenty fast like de bullet. But mebbeso you can outrun it, you're scared dat bad, Hosey." Frenchy held the knife ready to throw.

Hosey took a step back and shut the door, and sat down.

Jackie filled two shot glasses with a steady hand that spilled not a drop of the whisky. When Frenchy and Deevers reached for their drinks, she vaulted on top of the bar and swung her legs over and crossed her knees, her long silken shapely legs and red slippered feet swinging.

She tapped the bottle on the pine board bar. "This court will come to order." Her eyes narrowed a little.

The only light came from a kerosene lamp hung from the ridge log. Hosey leaped up and smashed at the lamp with his fist, shattering the lamp chimney. But the metal base was fastened in the heavy iron frame and the lighted wick flame guttered and threw grotesque shadows around the room. Hot splintered glass showered Frenchy and Deevers. Jackie screamed as the sharp hot splinters bit into her face and bare arms and shoulders.

Frenchy gripped the knife he had palmed in his hand. Deevers dropped the hangman's rope as the table overturned. He clawed frantically for his gun. Hosey gripped the big barroom chair and went into battle, swinging it at Deever's head as he thumbed back his gun hammer and squeezed the trigger.

The front door was kicked open and Wade Kirby stood there, a gun in his hand, blinking fast to focus his eyes to the flickering light. Before he could shoot, the giant circuit rider, gaunt, his clothes fire singed and blood spattered, his face and gray mane matted with dried blood, charged in with a mighty bellow.

Carbines cracked outside in the night as Horse Thief Deever's men came running from the horses they were sent

to guard. Wade Kirby crouched and ran back outside, his gun spitting fire. Jackie ran out behind Wade, and the circuit rider kicked the door shut as the lighted lampwick guttered and went out.

Hosea and Matthew Whitehead, son and father, stood back to back in the darkness.

Deever's gun spat a jet of flame and Hosey let out a bellow and threw the chain. Deevers screamed hoarsely and Hosey charged blindly at the sound. His hands found Deevers and they went down with a heavy crash and rolled over and over, in a wordless fight that sent tables and chairs crashing.

Frenchy let out a high pitched squeal as the circuit rider tore down the pine board bar and went over the wreckage after him.

Somewhere outside in the night Jackie screamed as a stray bullet struck her.

Wade Kirby's .45 roared through the sharper crack of .30-30 carbines, and then roared again and again, and the saddle carbines in the dead hands of Deever's horse thieves were silenced.

Inside the dark, powder smoke filled log saloon, Hosey slowly let go his death grip and staggered to his feet. He backed against the wall and his breath came in quick sobs. "Father!" Hosey's voice was no more than a rasping croaking sound.

"Over here, Son."

"Thank God—thank God I didn't kill you . . . that you're alive to hear me . . . I'm not fit to be your son."

Matthew Whitehead went over to his son. "I had not even the excuse of drunkenness, Hosea. I am not fit to preach the word of God. I attacked my own son in violence."

Neither of them heard the door open. They did not see Fawn standing there until she voiced a strange outcry. Wade Kirby was right behind her. "Don't go in there, Fawn," he warned her. "We don't know who's alive."

"Hosea and I are alive, Wade. Frenchy and Deevers are dead."

WADE KIRBY stepped inside and struck a match and held the flame cupped in his hand. It showed his face with a short stubble of black whiskers darkening his blunt jaw. His squinted eyes were the color of blued steel as he lit the stub of candle Fawn handed him.

"I owe my life to Wade Kirby," the circuit rider said slowly. "He dragged me out of the burning barn."

"I owe him more than that," said Hosey. "Only for him I would have my father's blood on my hands. I don't know how to say this, Wade—"

"Don't try Hosey," said Wade. "I was headed for your place to tell you that Jackie wasn't worth us fighting over. She told me she was going to marry Dan Deevers."

The circuit rider took hold of Fawn's hand. "This brave girl," he said, "met us at the river's edge to warn us. Otherwise, we would have run into a gun trap."

Hosey put his arm around Fawn's shoulders. "If you brought your Bible, father." Hosey told his father, "Fawn and I would like you to marry us as soon as possible."

From out in the night sounded a high pitched chanting wail. Fawn's hands moved in explanation. "Jackie was hit and killed by a stray bullet from the gun of one of Deever's drunken horse thieves. That is my mother mourning her. My mother wants to return to her own people. The Crees. They live in the Sweet Grass Hills across the Canadian line. Hosey and I will take her there after we are married."

The circuit rider led the way out into the clean air. He attended to the burial of the dead. They buried Jackie near the grave of her father.

Hosey and Wade rode down to Frenchy's pasture to get a tally on the stolen horses. The three yearling colts and the other stolen horses would be returned to their rightful owners. Wade and Hosey talked about going into the cow business together. Matthew Whitehead's range joined Frenchy's place and

by combining the two places they would have plenty of good range.

They talked about fixing up Frenchman's Crossing for the circuit rider's Gospel House.

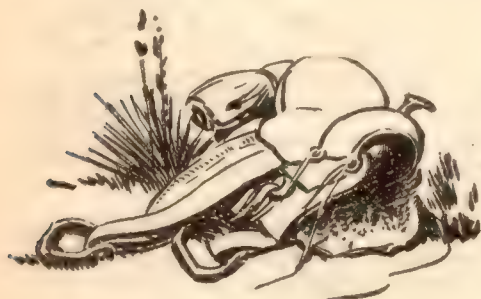
"You know, Hosey," said Wade earnestly, "we had the circuit rider sized up all wrong. Matthew Whitehead is much man."

"He made a believer out of his no-good son, Wade," said Hosey.

"I found your father in the harness room prayin' to God to forgive him for strikin' his own son instead of trying to help him. He wanted to die there in

the fire. I had to rope and drag him out with my horse. We watched the barn burn down. There was no wind so the fire didn't spread.

"And the gray mule he rides. That mule can out-run anything in the country and pack a man as big as Matthew Whitehead for weeks and months at a time. He told me the mule was out of a Kentucky thoroughbred mare. We have been as mistook about the gray mule as we were about the Bible totin' circuit rider he packed on the gospel trail. Shows how us young fellers can be fooled, Hosey."



SADDLE CHATTER

by
Harold Helfer

MEXICO has a canyon, Barranca de Cobre, which is considered more spectacular than the Grand Canyon. Almost hidden, it stretches from northeast to southwest about 300 air miles southwest of El Paso. Barranca de Cobre, which means "copper ravine," is more than 100 miles in length, 6 to 8 miles wide and 5000 feet deep.

AT GROVER, UTAH, a cow once drowned in a water bucket. She put her head into it for a drink of water, her horns got caught on the bucket-handle and she couldn't pull her head out.

THE INDIANS passed the first prohibition law. In 1660, Chief Oratam, of the Achkin-heshacky tribe, issued a mandate prohibiting his braves from drinking liquor.

THERE ARE less than 2,000,000 horses in this country today—compared to 21,430,000 30 years ago. The decline in horses and mules is proceeding so fast that even the

supply for the present need cannot be met.

RECENTLY, a downtown parade in Oklahoma City of Eighty-Niners, commemorating the opening of the state to settlers in 1889, was put to rout—by three teen-agers armed with BB guns and slingshots.

THE HOLLOW of a Douglas fir, measuring 54 feet in circumference, was used for a barn at Morton, Wash.

OBSERVATION OF The Waterloo Courier: When Indians ruled America, the squaws did all the work and the men loafed and hunted all day. And the white man thought he could improve on that!

JOEL McCREA, hero of many a Western movie of today, once, as a paper route boy, delivered the newspapers to the home of William S. Hart, first great cowboy star.

IT IS ESTIMATED that beneath her soil Colorado has 317,000,000,000 tons of coal.

Bootleg Beef



by **SYL MACDOWELL**

*It takes a clever man to
rustle with a truck—and
a cleverer one to catch him*

A LONG the rutted road, puddled by rain, the unlighted truck jolted and splashed. It was a straight road that straddled a section line and the man at the wheel, peering from the open cab window, marked his course by the slow march of fenceposts, dimly visible in the wet, windy darkness.

Reaching a fence corner, the driver contrived to swing the vehicle half around on the slick crown of the road, leaving skid tracks that suggested an accidental halting.

It was easy to do with smoothly worn tires. New treads that left sharply patterned sign were not good in a game like this, where the small details were sometimes very important.

Here the driver's companion got out. He was a thin, sallow youth with a patchy growth of beard on a pointed chin. He turned up the sheepskin collar

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of his windbreaker, hunching his shoulders to bring it higher, and directed the backing until the rear of the truck overhung the barbed-wire fence.

Now the driver switched off the ignition and clambered out. He joined the other by the fence where they stood for a long moment, accommodating their vision to the starless night. Before long they made out the shadowy forms of cattle closely bunched in the lush alfalfa pasture.

"They don't bed down in weather like this and they bunch at a fence corner when it blows, just like I reckoned," observed the older man with smug self-approval. He was thick-bodied, emphatic in speech and movement.

"Them warmed-up long yearlings will run heavy," calculated the youth, scraping a muddied boot on the cornerpost brace.

"Pen-fed shorthorns, like I done told you, Chad. They'll go eight hundred pounds easy. They ain't range scrubs. Reach down that chain hook. We'll pull off this job easier'n a skeered lizard's tail."

Their talk was soft-vowelled, a familiar accent in this new Western country that was filling up with Southern migrants. But it was a delusive softness. The chain rattled down. They lowered the stout, cleated tailgate, so that one end rested firmly on the ground inside the fence.

The one called Chad took a rope from the bed of the truck, whacked moisture from it and crawled through the fence. He shook out the coils deftly as he approached the cattle, circling widely. At his slow urging they drifted until the fence corner winged them in.

QUICKLY he made his throw. There was a brief, scurrying movement as he tossed the rope-end. The man standing in the truck caught it, made it fast to a small hand winch. With a choked blat the lassoed animal fought the tightening noose, slipped, fell, was dragged over the wet alfalfa, then scrambled up

at a thumping kick from the active Chad.

They loaded and snubbed the short-horn. Again the rope whistled and slithered out for a running horn hold. They hazed the second animal aboard as the rest of the young stock scattered.

Up went the tailgate and quickly the truck was in motion again. Chad snuggled down inside his fleece collar and stamped squishy boots on the floorboards.

"I'm fitter'n a whey-fed hog, Jeff," he chattered, rubbing his bony knees.

"Meanin' you're dry?"

The driver wriggled and reached. Chad's cold fingers closed on a bottle. He tilted it to his lips, swaying and gurgling. The road rose gradually out of the fenced bottomlands. It topped a rise, thudding over a jagged caliche outcrop, then rumbled down a short pitch onto a mesquite bosque. Here it was smooth, flat going. But the caliche rock had done for a thin tire. There was a dull, gusty explosion.

Jeff swore, and the cattle scrambled as he braked abruptly. Chad hissed a sibilant oath, swung out on the running board and lowered a boot to the deep, rich black adobe.

"Slickern' a peeled egg!" he half whined.

Jeff bellied out from behind the wheel, threw up the seat cushion and hauled out a jack. He groped his way back alongside the truck, hunkered down with a grunt and got the jack set. Chad hovered over him, shivering. He cast anxious eyes up and down the road.

"We couldn't see lights a-coming down in this wallow, Jeff," he fretted.

"What good if we did? You're skittish as a snipe! Get out that spare!"

Chad stooped and fumbled at the extra tire cradled under the back of the truck. Hoofs struggled for a new foothold on the wet truck-bed at each lurching lift of the jack. Then, with a quick sidewise movement, Chad blurted alarm and leaped clear as the heavily loaded truck slid off the jack.

Jeff spouted uncouth, ugly swear words, mopped both hands on his pants and struck a match. It flared for a second in his cupped hands. With a final expression of disgust he kicked the bent and useless jack off the road.

"We got no choice!" he muttered. "Climb in!"

The slack tire flapped raggedly as the truck churned across the bosque. Jeff used his headlights now, for the road snaked along the rock-strewn base of a range of foothills. Once he rapped Chad on the arm in silent demand, and the youth passed him the bottle. Jeff drained it and sent it crashing to the roadside. Presently he brightened.

"Only two-three miles from here to the highway. Recollect that little old gas station at the turn-off? We'll borrow a jack, then we can dingle."

"Might borrow trouble, parading in there," Chad fretted.

"Huh!" Jeff snorted scornfully. "Young nipper that runs it ain't smart or he wouldn't be at such a crazy place!"

"How you so plumb certain?"

"I done some frivolling around beforehand. Like I always do. He's new there."

Chad huddled and stared through the splattered windshield until the headlight beams, sweeping around a final turn, bathed the stark, glass-sided gas station in brightness.

"Don't drive smack-dab in by them gas pumps, Jeff!" protested the uneasy youth. "Besides which, the place is dark, shut up."

"I'll open 'er," Jeff declared confidently, steering for the sheltering canopy. His thick palm poised over the horn button.

But before he could honk, a flashlight blinked on inside the station. They saw a tousled attendant sit up on a cot and grope for his shoes. He shot back a bolt, opened the door and flicked his light outside, letting it linger on the lacerated tire. Jeff puffed out of the cab.

"Mighty sorry, Bub, rousin' you out this time of night, so's we can rassle

on this here spare."

"It's what I'm here for, mister," came the cheery answer. "Bad night out."

"Country needs a wetting and so does us that depends on the grass."

STILL gripping the flashlight, the attendant wheeled out a dolly jack and maneuvered it under the truck. Chad climbed out stiffly, slanted a bleary eye at the sky and saw stars through gaps in the clouds. The wind, bearing the spicy scent of rain-freshened creosote bush, bit deeply into him. He flapped his arms for warmth and came around the back of the truck. He watched the attendant furtively, leaving the talk to Jeff. He was relieved a little when no curious comment was made. The attendant, about his own age, worked briskly, seemingly oblivious of the young beefs with the Running S brand beyond the high stake panel.

But he didn't look like a fool. The flashlight, now held by Jeff, revealed a purposeful profile. He lifted off the muddy wheel and Chad rolled the spare around.

Suddenly the attendant asked: "Hear about Pop Senter's kid busting a leg?"

The flashlight beam wavered. Jeff didn't respond at once.

"Sho' now!" he finally breathed tensely. "How'd that happen?"

"Usual thing. Got throwed and tromped."

Jeff paused before making a carefully noncommittal comment. "Took him in to the doctor, I reckon."

"Sure, that's right." The attendant stooped stiffly and started twisting on lugs.

"Well now, youngster's bones patch quick. Be ridin' again in a month, like as not."

"Sooner'n that, maybe," was the agreeable response.

No more was said until the last lug was cinched tight. The attendant dropped the wrench and eased down the jack.

Jeff tossed a silver half-dollar at his feet and stepped onto the running board.

"Mightily obliged, Bub." He motioned to Chad. "Let's roll." He returned the flashlight, climbed in and toed the starter.

A slow grin spread over Jeff's face as they put the station behind them, and the truck gathered speed on the smooth pavement.

"Reckon I outsmarted him, letting on we was neighbors to that feller he called Pop Senter."

"And I kept him from getting a look at our license plate," Chad said, stretching out his wet legs and relaxing. Lulled by the throaty song of the engine, he soon slept. Over a long, winding pass, through a summit settlement that the highway sign said was State Line, then down a long descent, Jeff drove without pause.

It was gray dawn when Chad blinked awake, yawned and stretched. They were turning into a town. He eyed the neon sign of an all-night eating place and sniffed hungrily.

"Here we are at Bradlock. Purty soon I reckon we can afford a real big breakfast, huh?" said Jeff.

He drove through the store district and finally turned onto a cinder driveway beside a railroad spur and stock pens. He hauled up beside a raised platform that fronted a storage plant. A lofty evaporator steamed against the early sky. Across the platform, beyond a smudged window, a man sat under an electric droplight reading a newspaper.

As the truck stopped, he laid the paper on a desk, rose and came out. He was chewing a cold cigar. He gave no greeting but came to the edge of the platform, and looked over the truck's side onto two sleek, fat backs.

Jeff joined him, rubbing cold-numbed hands together.

"Brung you some baby beef, Garber."

The other thoughtfully drew the cigar from his lips and twiddled a fat little finger at an imaginary ash.

"A little wet?" he grunted.

"What of it—if you can save yourself a dollar a hundred?"

Garber shrugged. "I don't stick out my neck for a measly fifteen or twenty bucks. Not when I gotta show a branded hide and bill of sale for every carcass."

Jeff gave a contemptuous laugh.

"Fuddle duddle! Many's the time you've made one hide cover more carcasses than Nature ever intended."

"Awright, awright. What'll you take?"

"They heft eight hundred and better, killing weight. The market says twelve cents. Crowding a hundred apiece, that is."

"One fifty for the both."

"Why, dod-rot your—"

Garber turned back toward his cubbyhole office.

"Take it or leave it. I ain't haggling."

Jeff rasped: "Come on, then, Garber. Count out your bird seed so's we can get along over to the chute and unload and go get us some breakfast."

Garber took a good look around. The premises were deserted. It was light enough to make sure of that. He pulled a wad from his pants pocket, rolled the cigar to a corner of his mouth, wetted a thumb and peeled off the money.

HE HANDED it over, and as Jeff's hand closed on it, from the edge of the platform almost beside them came a casual voice:

"And just in time for breakfast you'll be, the three of you. Over at the country jail."

Jeff froze. Garber's cigar drooped as he stared down into the muzzle of a revolver. Chad slipped out of the cab seat but the gun swung on him before he could run.

"Line up there with your pal, Rivet-breeches!" crisply ordered the young attendant from the turnoff gas station. As the waxen-faced Chad obeyed, he added cheerfully: "Could do with a cup of coffee myself. Sort of a cool ride, it was in that open-air spare tire rack."

Chad bawled: "And you allowed as

how you outsmarted him, Jeff, you dang knothead!"

"N-no such party as—as Pop Senter, is that it?" Jeff croaked.

The firm-faced young man behind the six-shooter smiled.

"Who's Senter?" Garber crackled, turning furiously on Jeff.

The gas station attendant answered him.

"Maybeso you overlooked the Running S brand on these young feeders."

He favored Jeff and the sniffing Chad with his attention next.

"Been a-laying for you beef bootleggers. That's why I took the gas station job. To keep an eye on whoever used the turnoff. When you let on that you knowed Pop, I figured I had you. Was plumb sure of it when you got in

such a sweat to leave that you forgot your spare wheel with the busted tire."

"I—I was fooled by that lying talk about a busted leg," Jeff husked.

Garber threw away his unlighted cigar.

"Let's go inside and talk this over," he wheedled.

"Sure, Garber. Herd in there, the three of you. But the talk will be over the telephone. With the sheriff."

The young man boosted himself up onto the platform.

They backed sullenly before his gun.

"I'll tell him to bring along three blank warrants. Got to do this up right. You see, I done some law studying a while back." He took a limping step after them, then finished: "While I was laid up with this busted leg."



IT HAPPENED OUT WEST

ANYBODY who visited the west in the early 1800s couldn't help noticing a great moving blackness that covered the prairie from horizon to horizon, caused by the tremendous herds of familiar buffalo. And anybody who came upon the same scene toward the end of the Century wouldn't be able to avoid noticing the animals also—but now all he'd see would be carcasses. They were so plentiful that a person could walk the whole day through on the abandoned bodies, without his feet touching the bare ground.

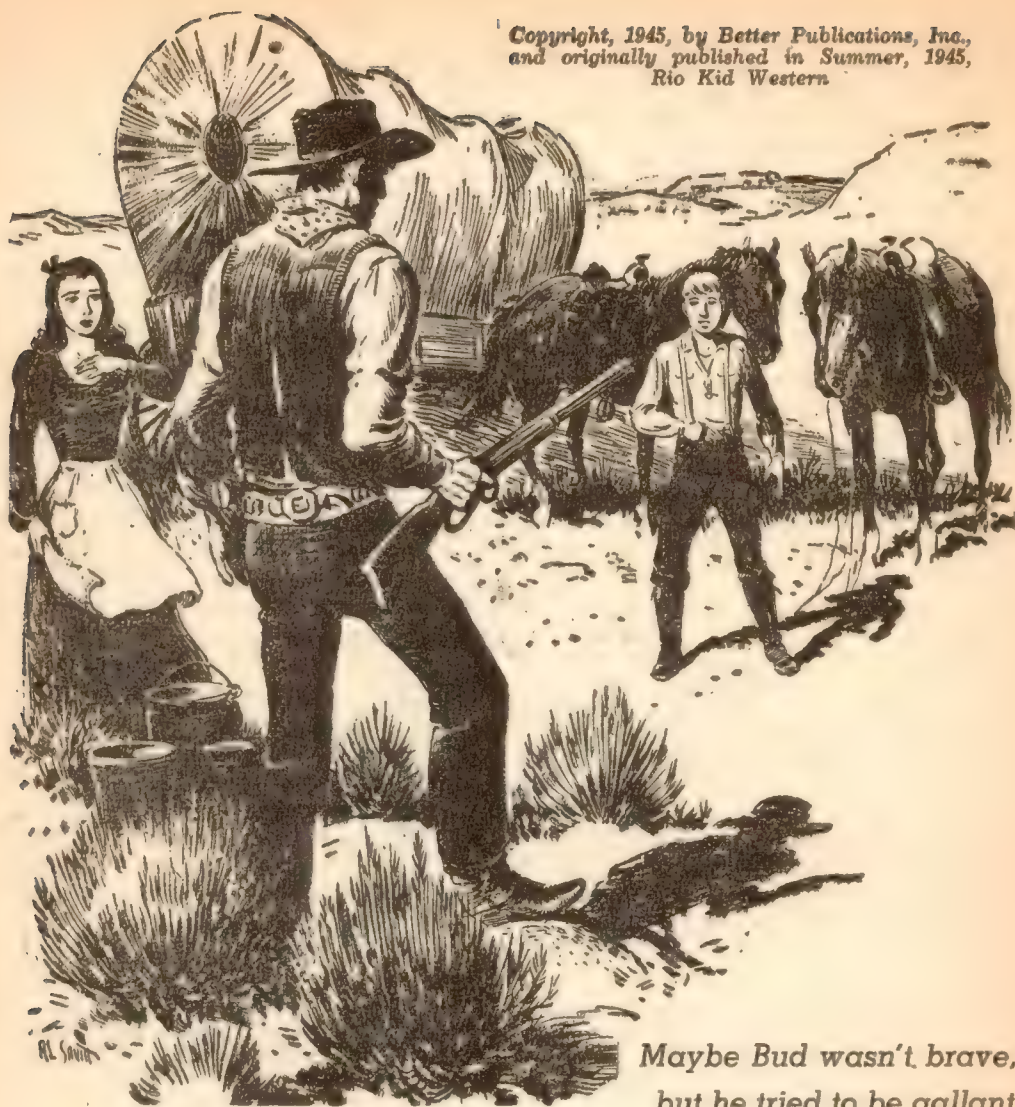
Lots of people were responsible for this slaughter, from the world-famous Buffalo Bill, who shot approximately five thousand all by himself in a scant year and a half, to the people who set the styles in the cities back East. They'd started a hue and cry for buffalo robes, and since the price was high, every ambitious settler hunted for buffalo.

One settler, however, nearly lost his life in the attempt. The hunter had gotten separated from his companions in the flurry of a sudden storm. Consequently, since the cold was unbearable, he did what was commonly practiced in such predicaments, killed a large bull buffalo, removed the viscera, and crawled inside the now thoroughly scooped-out carcass. Then he calmly went to sleep, while the elements raged on, knowing full well that the warmth of the creature would protect him.

But he figured wrong, and nearly lost his own life as a result, for the cold was so intense that the ribs of the beast had frozen together. The weld was so firm that he couldn't wrest himself free. He never would have gotten out of his prison alive if his companions hadn't arrived and discovered his plight in the nick of time.

—Bess Ritter

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Rio Kid Western



*Maybe Bud wasn't brave,
but he tried to be gallant*

OUTLAW

By Murray Leinster

BUB sat in the shade beside the broken-down Conestoga wagon and thought savagely bitter thoughts. Sunbaked and impassable mountains reared up to northward, but the water hole squatted among the last of the foothills. A sere, scorched valley spread for miles.

The wagon was braced nearly level by stones piled where the front axle should have been. The two loosened wheels lay

on the ground.

Bub was maybe twelve years old. He was thin and peaked, and his face was the face of tragedy. Just one week ago, his pappy had been hung back in Hornet, and Bub knew that his pappy hadn't done what they hung him for.

There was a stirring inside the wagon and Ellen came out.

"'Bout time to start cooking, Bub," she said. "Would you mind fetchin' some water from the spring?"

It wasn't a spring. It was a water hole. Bub felt a comforting sense of male superiority. Ellen ought to know a water hole from a spring. She was nineteen, and a married woman besides.

Jess, her husband, had gone on the dry forty miles to Merrily with one of the oxen to get the broken axle fixed. He might be back tomorrow.

Meantime Bub was in charge. Jess and Ellen had picked him up in Hornet, stunned with hatred and despair. They were taking him on to California. They'd bring him up, they said, if he'd let them.

He went silently to the water hole and filled the bucket. The remaining oxen browsed stoically in the brush near by. Bub went back to his bitterness. His pappy had tried to fight when he was cornered, but his ancient and rusty gun had burst on its first discharge. There was dirt in the barrel. That was bad luck, but anyhow his pappy had been brave.

Ellen looked up from the fire. Bub grudgingly tolerated her amid his passion of hate for all the world.

"Somebody's comin', Bub," said Ellen. "Better wipe off your face. You wouldn't want anybody to see you'd been cryin'."

Bub saw a distant cloud of dust. He clenched his fists.

"He's comin' from Hornet," he said bitterly.

Ellen watched. It was a rider with a led horse. The rider turned aside to go to the top of a foothill and search the way behind him. Then he came on. Bub watched with hostile, savage eyes. He hated everything that was connected with Hornet, where his pappy had been hung. He hated every-

thing in the world, grudgingly excepting only Ellen and her husband, Jess.

When the stagecoach had stopped at the water hole this morning, Bub had gone off in the brush and watched from hiding. Only two men had been on the stage, the driver and the guard, but Bub told himself he wished they were dead, because they were going to Hornet.

THE distant rider came on, the led horse jogging behind him. Ellen went to the task of preparing for a meal. But from time to time she glanced up at the nearing dust. Presently she said:

"Bub, what'd you do with Jess' squirrel rifle?"

Bub had tried to shoot prairie chickens that morning when a little flock had appeared near the water hole. He'd failed dismally, and he'd hidden the rifle in elaborate avoidance of a confession of failure. He flushed and went and got the rifle. Ellen leaned it against the wagon.

The stranger came clearly into view over a rise, moving ahead of a dust-cloud. The led horse trailed in it. Bub knew that was wrong. The stranger carried a rifle across his saddle and had a revolver at his hip.

Ellen straightened up and stood awaiting him. She could reach the squirrel rifle by stretching out her hand. The stranger reined in, his eyes restless.

"Howdo, suh," said Ellen in her company manners.

The stranger's eyes took in the wagon propped up by rocks and saw the wheels on the ground. They saw Bub, scowling at him.

"Howdy," said the stranger. "Busted down, huh? Your man's gone off to get the axle fixed?"

"Yes, suh," said Ellen, still politely. "He went off to Merrily, suh. He'll be back right soon."

Ellen was usually cordial. She had talked with easy friendliness to the driver and guard of the stage, that morning. But she was only polite to this man. She didn't like him. So Bub said harshly:

"If you want to talk to Jess, you better

get on to Merrily. He ain't likely to get back till tomorrow."

He wanted the man to go away. But Ellen's face changed. It paled a little. The man looked unpleasantly pleased. Bub's hands clenched.

"Bub don't like strangers, suh," said Ellen. She seemed a little short of breath. "He wants you should go on. Shame on you, Bub."

Bub kicked at the ground. Ellen looked queer, and the stranger looked pleased. Somehow Bub knew he had made a mistake, so he hated the stranger more than ever. But the stranger dismounted, still holding his rifle instead of dropping it in the saddle-butt.

"Take care of the gentleman's horses, Bub," said Ellen. It sounded as if her throat hurt her. "He's right capable, suh, even if he ain't but twelve. He'll take care of them right."

Bub advanced sullenly. But the stranger snapped:

"You touch those animals, boy, and I'll break your neck!" He added smoothly, "I'm a United States deputy marshal, ma'am. I'd admire to have you tell me if you seen any strangers round here today."

"No, suh," said Ellen. "Only the driver and the guard of the stagecoach. They drove by about sunrise and stopped to water their team."

The stranger tied his horse to a bush. He didn't water it, or loose its cinches, and he didn't sponge out the nostrils of the led horse that had been trailing in a dust cloud.

"They won't be back, ma'am," he said in a sort of unpleasant humor. "They got killed, about thirty miles back. That's why I'm here. I'm looking for the man that done it. I'd admire to talk to your husband," he finished ominously.

"Jess ain't killed nobody!" said Bub fiercely. "He wouldn't!"

Ellen was terribly pale. Bub stared at her and suddenly gulped. His heart began to pound. The stranger sat at ease where Bub had been a little while since. He was in the shade of the wagon, and Jess' squirrel rifle was within his reach. Ellen

moved with seeming naturalness to be farther away from him. She touched the cooking pots on the fire.

"Yes, ma'am!" said the stranger, with relish. "That's why I'm here! A smart man, the fella that killed those two! He tied his horse up in some brush off the trail like it had got hung up there, and he laid down on the ground with one spur in the stirrup like he'd been throwed and drug to death. And the stage come along, lickety-split, and the driver and guard seen him—there weren't no passengers—and they stopped the stage to see was there a breath of life in him. And as they ambled up, all unsuspecting, he killed them both. Pop-pop! Like that!"

HE LOOKED at Bub, grinning.

"And that's why I'm here," he repeated. "That feller would have to come on this way. He'd be stopping at this water hole, it's sure. If he ain't been here, he will be. But I'm here first!"

"I don't believe nobody'd do what you said," said Bub with scorn. "Not make out like he was hurt to get a chance to murder folks that come to help him!"

"This feller done it," said the stranger, grinning. "Smart!"

"It ain't so!" said Bub savagely. "Nobody'd be that dirty mean!"

"Bub!" said Ellen sharply. Her voice was higher pitched than usual, and her face was deathly white beneath the brown. "You Bub! Ain't you been told you mustn't sass strangers?" She stopped and seemed to fight for breath. "You—shut—your—mouth, now!"

She brought out a heavy plate and put food upon it. The spoon clattered against the earthenware.

"H-here, suh," she said, and swallowed. "If you'll sit up on the wagon seat, suh, you can eat more comfortable."

"Thank you ma'am," said the stranger comfortably. "I'll sit right where I am."

His own gun and the squirrel rifle were both within his reach, both leaning against the wagon. Bub hated him horribly. He had the grown-up's attitude of alternate menace and mocking condescension.

"I figure ma'am," said the stranger, with his mouth full, "that if that killer was to come by here, he'd figger he had to wipe both of you out so's there wouldn't be nobody to tell what he looked like. So—" he grinned—"you're lucky I'm here."

Ellen's hands trembled. She folded them under her apron. Bub kicked fiercely at the ground. He didn't believe what the stranger said about whoever had held up the stage. It was a lie. Like they'd lied about his pappy. He wanted to do something terrible to this man. But he mustn't. So he slipped off into the brush. He could tell Ellen didn't like the stranger, either. If he could only get to Jess's squirrel rifle, he'd chase him right out of camp. Yes, sir! Only the rifle leaned against the wagon, right next to the stranger. Then something occurred to Bub. Something vengeful.

"He'd whip me something awful if he caught me," he said fiercely, under his breath, "but I don't care!"

He lied. His throat seemed to swell up as he contemplated the awful vengeance the stranger might take. His own pappy had beaten him pretty hard sometimes, especially when he was drunk, but this stranger might beat him worse. And he came from Hornet. At the thought, Bub filled the pocket of his overalls with a gritty, adhesive earth before he came out of the brush again.

The stranger still sat by the broken-down wagon. He grinned at Ellen. She was ghastly white, and her hands clenched and unclenched, and the stranger grinned more widely.

HE DIDN'T see Bub. Bub drifted like a shadow behind the two horses, and then around to the other side of the wagon. Soundlessly he crept toward it. His bare feet made no noise as he slipped up to the wagon seat. He crawled over the impedimenta inside the wagon body. His heart beat inside his skinny ribs as if it would burst, and his breath sounded to him like a loud roaring noise.

The stranger laughed.

"Yes, ma'am! That's what you got to figger on! If this here killer was to come

here, it'd be safest for him to wipe out you and the boy and then go on and kill your man, too, to keep him from coming here and finding you and giving the alarm. And what'd you say to him to persuade him not to?"

Bub reached the place he wanted, inside the wagon. The cover was a little bit loose around the edges. His heart hammering harder against his ribs, he thrust his fist down, outside the board side of the wagon. The muzzle of the stranger's rifle was just below him. He heard Ellen gasp. But then she said.

"There—there wouldn't be anything I could say to him, suh. If he was to kill me, he'd kill me, suh."

Bub's fingers trickled fine, adhesive, gritty dirt down into the muzzle of the stranger's gun. His hand trembled and shook. His breath seemed to rasp in his throat. But he fixed the stranger's gun like his pappy's had been. Then he felt a fierce and desperate triumph. The stranger couldn't kill anybody with that gun, now! Bub drew back his hand and shivered. He prepared to sneak away again.

"Come on, now, ma'am!" said the stranger. "Wouldn't you offer him a little kiss if he was to take your promise not to tell on him?"

Bub scowled in indignant outrage. A body didn't mention kissing to a married lady! Ellen said steadily:

"If I was to say anything, it would be to Bub. I'd say to him to get away from here fast, and run on and find Jess, and warn him of what had happened here. And I'd say if he couldn't do that, then—to try to get away himself and—try to be a good man."

Her voice took on a desperate urgency as she spoke. Bub stiffened, unbelieving. Then the stranger stirred. Noting the rifle he moved it away from the wagon beyond her reach.

"All right, ma'am," he said mockingly. "I got to be getting on. We won't play no more. I'll—"

"Run, Bub!" cried Ellen desperately. "Tell Jess! Watch out! Get away!"

Bub pushed aside the side cover of the

wagon. For one instant he stared in white-faced incredulity at Ellen as she stood with a flaming brand from the fire in her hand, facing the stranger. Then Bub cried out shrilly in awful rage. He reached down to jerk up Jess's old squirrel rifle.

It caught on the loose cover. Then there came a savage explosion, and a revolver-bullet smashed through the wooden side plank within inches of Bub's bare leg. He heard Ellen scream to him to run.

He ran. After all, Bub was just twelve, and until this instant he had not imagined any greater danger to himself than a thrashing. He heard other shots behind him. He ran like a young antelope or a jackrabbit, his face ashen and his brain conscious only of terror. But that very terror kept him from diving into the brush which might have concealed him. He kept in the clear where he could run faster. He gasped as he ran, and he heard the pistol roar empty, and there was a pause, and then the deep boom of a heavy-calibre rifle.

PRESENTLY Ellen's voice called him back. He went to her, filled with an abysmal shame because he had fled when she needed help. The camp looked exactly as before. There was the broken-down wagon, and the fire, and the stranger's two horses still short-tethered where they had been tied without watering. But the stranger was not visible. Instead, there was something on the ground that Ellen covered with a blanket as he drew near.

"It's all right, Bub," said Ellen unsteadily. "He's dead. When he tried to shoot you with the rifle it exploded, and it killed him."

Bub gulped. His pappy's gun had exploded, and it hadn't killed him. He looked

fearfully at Ellen, but saw no reproach. Then a glimmer of hatred came back to Bub, hatred which would cover the shame of his flight and also the shocking sensation of having been responsible for the death of a man.

"Ol'—ol' deputy United States marshal," he gasped, to cover his terror. "He—come from Hornet! Maybe he was one of those fellers that hung my pappy!"

"Hush!" said Ellen shakily. She put her arm about Bub. "He's the man who held up the stage, Bub. He's the man who killed the driver and the guard. He was going to kill us so nobody would know what he looked like or which way he went. Look at the packhorse, Bub. It was hitched to the stage this morning."

There was silence. Bub stared at the packhorse. He should have recognized it. He should have noticed! He was ashamed. He could have wept with the shame of his incompetence, when a woman had seen something he had missed. But Ellen's arm tightened about his shoulder.

"Jess is going to be—right grateful to you, Bub," Ellen said in an unsteady voice. "And I am, too. Maybe there'll be a reward for killing that murderer and getting back what he stole. But, Bub—would you mind if I kissed you? I'm so awfully grateful."

Bub submitted with the ill grace of a twelve-year-old boy. Then he wriggled. He scowled.

He swallowed and said harshly:

"Well, there ain't nothing to make a fuss about! You go sit down somewhere. You look kind of funny. And quit worrying. I'm right here. If any more killers come around I'll kill them, too!" He scowled more terribly. "That's what they need, anyways!"

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Though Luke Short has written many other great western stories, **RAMROD** alone has put him into the company of the classics.

•
THE BIG CORRAL by Al Cody

Man and snakes, someone remarked, are the only two critters that don't feel gratitude. Tripp Devero must have thought of that when he saved Rawe North's life. Two westerners alone in the city, they naturally sided each other against the gangs that operate from dark alleys. And Devero stopped the knife that was aimed for North's back. His reward? "Sooner or later I'll have to smash you!" North told him.

North came home to find his cattle gone, his men killed or scared off, his range scorched and blackened. "I'll get Devero for this!" he swore. But first he had his ranch to restock—to buy, beg or steal cattle—to kill for them if need be. And above all, never to forget the coming showdown with Tripp Devero, the showdown in which revenge would exact its final payment!

•
GUN FEUD by W. C. Tuttle

Mickey Davis was more than reckless to exercise squatter's rights in the heart of Flint

Harper's range. To Harper the upstart Bar D ranch was a fly to be crushed with one hand. Then Mickey made passes at Harper's daughter, Norma, and Norma came more than halfway to meet him. The result was a blowoff which set Mickey and Harper at each other's throats. The tension built swiftly to a point-blank gun fight which would surely have ended in both men's deaths, when Norma took a hand. She got herself kidnapped in a most mysterious manner.

This was the most serious crime on the range; so important that all normal grudges and ordinary killings were immediately forgotten. Harper and Mickey Davis, sworn enemies a moment before, found themselves riding and fighting side by side to find the girl both loved and to stamp out their common menace.

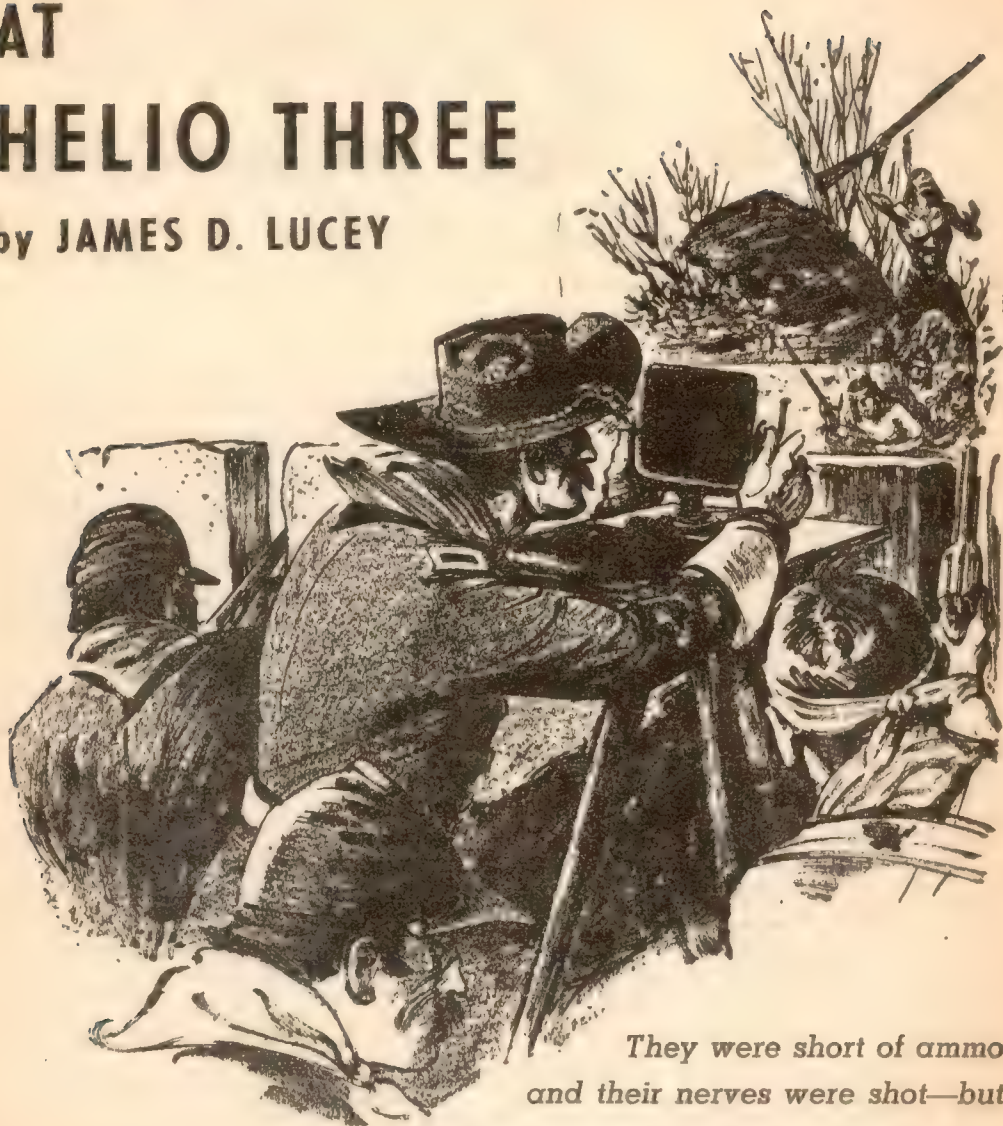
■
BEYOND THE RIO GRANDE by William MacLeod Raine

Lee Reynolds, lovely and desirable, knew better than to turn her back on Rance Brannon. But a girl can't be on her guard every minute. And a minute was all Brannon needed. He caught and crushed her to him, rained passionate kisses on her protesting lips. She fought, but her strength was nothing against his. Desperately she reached behind her, groped in an open desk drawer, brought out a little revolver. As it came up Brannon slapped the barrel aside and the muzzle blast licked harmlessly to one side.

Lee felt better at not having killed him and watching him go, thought she had made herself sufficiently clear to have no more trouble from the same cause. But Brannon wasn't through, as she swiftly found out. Caught with her rider, Jack Hadley, by the Mexican revolutionary, Megare, Lee Reynolds found Brannon entering her life again. He was a colonel in the rebel army, no less, a man whose word could send them to their deaths and a man willing to give that word, for the humiliation of his last meeting with Lee Reynolds had burned a mad desire for revenge deep into his crooked soul.

HELL AT HELIO THREE

by JAMES D. LUCEY



*They were short of ammo
and their nerves were shot—but*

O'Neil had to hold them together, or else!

IT WAS dawn, and time for Apaches. At the desert's rim, the cavalry officer was waiting it out in a string of sand-flung boulders. A thin arc of sun lifted over the horizon. On

the desert there was a rifle's whipcrack, out by the lone hill that maps of the Arizona Department labeled *Helio-graph Station Three*.

Gray eyes thoughtful, Lieutenant

O'Neil slowly drew his carbine. The rifle smash had died away. A lizard stirred the sand. A buzzard flapped upward. Then, no other sounds. Resting the carbine on the McClellan's saddle-bow, O'Neil grinned tightly and angled his big roan into the desert.

He was a big black-haired man, a few early flecks of gray in his mustache and his temples. His face had reddened from the years of sun and wind the army had shown him. He was an Irishman who usually had one eyebrow cocked at something amusing that fellow officers couldn't see. An officer who was apt to forget himself and stand around hip-shot and comfortable.

To his left, something moved. Shadows of stones lay a yard long; alkali glittered red and fluorescent. Nothing looked natural, and maybe, he thought, it wasn't an Apache's red head-band he'd seen out there, after all. He looked away, looked back, and caught a yellow moccasin-boot sliding from sight. . . . Wanted me to see him, O'Neil decided, wants me to circle into a trap, likely. He rode straight ahead.

The Apache was neither friendly nor unfriendly, as Apaches went. He was just plain dangerous, and his being there made whatever was wrong with the helio station worse, likely, than Deland had figured.

"Messages come through slow," Major Deland had said. "Garbled sometimes. And there's a bronco band of Coyotero Apaches out there. O'Neil, it's of the utmost importance that they don't go hostile and run off to join Geronimo's Chiricahuas. And lack of discipline in those stations guarantees that they'll do exactly that."

THE Apache was behind him now. He tried to relax, tried to keep his thoughts on Deland. After a while his fist clenched angrily round the carbine stock. Important? Sure it was. But it'd be a damn sight more important if he was in Mexico chasing Chiricahuas. He'd been in the Cavalry thirteen years.

He'd fought Indians every year. It was a full twelve months since his field promotion. Since then, nothing but building posts, drilling recruits, paper work—a bunch of piddling details. Now, eight middle-of-nowhere helio outfits!

As he neared Helio Three, his anger shifted, and he tried to pick holes in the defenses. The hill was more like two hills joined by a brush-choked saddle-back and a draw that stretched to the talus slope at the base. On the higher summit was the station. This side of it, the beginnings of a wall faced the post's natural approaches, the saddle-back and the opposite hill.

Not much wrong. He slogged the carbine into its scabbard, coming suddenly to the decision he'd put off all night: For once, act like a shavetail! Whip 'em into shape by the numbers! Give 'em inspections, fatigue details, practice and more practice till they hate your guts. Till they bust their backs to get a message out fast and right and get you out of here.

An ugly *whuck* exploded the silence above. It became rhythmic, like a man's hand steadily clapping a tight rifle sling. White with anger, O'Neil plunged the horse up the gully. He dismounted onto the wall, stood there with hands knotted studying the scene before him.

A soldier was strapped to the ladder leading to the roof. Behind him stood a squat, heavily built sergeant, a broad leather dress belt in one tattooed hand. The belt whipped down upon the bare red-streaked back. "Fool!" the sergeant grunted, and again the belt whirled. "Warned you! Told every damn one of you!"

Ten men in dirty, rumpled uniforms stood silently watching. Some watched with hate for the sergeant. Most with nothing at all. Two with brutal pleasure.

O'Neil hit the ground and shoved roughly through them.

The sergeant was snarling, "Want to get us killed, huh? Want to die with your head hangin' in a fire! Well, I'll

teach you, by—" The lifting wrist was locked in O'Neil's hand. Standing stiff, not turning his head, the sergeant said: "Let go, fella. Let go and get out of sight before you're dealt the same cards." They stood rigid, each straining against the other. Abruptly, the sergeant pivoted on him: "All right, you fool!" A huge left fist hovered inches from O'Neil's jaw. "Where in hell did you come from?"

"How I got here without being seen is something else you're going to explain, Sergeant. Turn that man loose!"

The sergeant pushed his lank blond hair from his eyes and looked O'Neil over. His breath rasped through a nose broken several times. "Jenkins here took a shot at one of them 'Paches. Now, I gave orders that—"

"Release him."

"We got us the whole Coyotero nation out there. I ordered these men not to anger them critters."

"We'll talk later. Release him."

The small blue eyes squinted with the deliberation of his words: "You're Cavalry. You ain't nothin' to do with us."

"I'm gettin' tired of tellin' you to let him loose."

Turning, the sergeant bellowed at a private, first class, not five feet away. "Cut him down, Roy! Take him inside away from these flies!"

O'Neil said, "What's your name, Sergeant?"

"Andersen. Lars Andersen."

"All right, Andersen, I'm O'Neil. Faversham had sunstroke, I'm taking his place. Ever hear of saying *sir*, Andersen?"

"I've heard."

O'NEIL turned from him, smiling slightly. The post was as he'd expected. Faversham was too fresh from West Point to know better; he'd manned Helio Three with his worst men. It was the hottest post: it was what they deserved.

"I don't like that brush in the saddle-

back, Andersen."

"Ain't had time to clear it."

Again that sullen probing for a reprimand. Hand clenched, O'Neil stared at him a moment. Then decided he'd have to let Andersen keep it up—until he learned what was eating the man. "Let's take a look at that helio device."

They climbed the ladder and crossed the roof to a heavy tripod built in one corner. Next it, a little fellow stood hopping from foot to foot waiting to be noticed.

Andersen said, "Corporal Schneider was a telegrapher. Now he's got a new toy. Even when he don't have to, he plays with the thing."

Studying the corporal, O'Neil guessed: About forty; not too bright. "I've never seen one of these before. Explain it."

Schneider beamed. "Yes, sir. Sir, the M-Five Heliograph is a communications instrument designed for flashing coded messages by the utilization of sunlight. . . ."

Andersen snorted, and O'Neil had a hard time suppressing his own grin. Three minutes later, Schneider exhausted the pages he'd memorized from the Signal Corps Manual and started demonstrating. Swinging the instrument on its pivot, he sighted with the small telescope mounted on its side, altered the mirror's angle for the sun, and began flipping a rod that swung the mirror through a quarter-circle. Tiny flashes answered from a mountain far to the northeast. Schneider laughed. "There, sir! Station Nine, sir. Better than forty miles away."

"How many of the men here can use it, Schneider?"

The corporal gulped and looked at Andersen. Andersen replied, "He ain't had time to teach 'em. We been busy buildin' the post."

"Your first job is this helio. Comfort and safety of the men come second." O'Neil pointed to a large pair of binoculars hanging from an upright in the platform's center. "There's no one on

lookout duty."

"Like I told you, we been busy."

"For the past five minutes there's been a smoke in the sky. You're too busy to notice that?"

Swinging the barracks door open, he watched Jenkins and the other men gradually get to their feet and stand slouched and waiting to be reamed out for not coming to attention. "*Outside!*" he ordered. They took their time about that too.

Andersen came in and leaned at ease against the closed door. O'Neil said, "I counted eleven men. That leaves two missing out of your full complement. Think they made it past the Apaches?"

"Hope we never hear of it if they did."

O'Neil smiled, asked, "You'd all go, huh?"

"That's right." He shrugged slightly, "What the hell. There ain't enough of us to fight off an attack. There ain't even ammo for us that's here. And then this damn heat and the alky water." He licked the cigarette he was rolling, added quietly, "We come here by wagon. Ain't no chance to walk out. You'd better watch that horse."

Eyes narrowed with thought, O'Neil gazed about the room. Clothes lay on the bunks, blankets trailed to the dirt. Papers, discarded magazines littered the aisle. Lack of discipline, he was thinking, incompetency with the helio—about the only hope they had was a transfer back to the Fort for those things. And he decided he'd be damned if he'd let Andersen get away with it. "Sergeant, this place is a pigsty. Get a detail in here and clean it up."

"We ain't so much for keepin' things like for a Saturday inspection."

"Now, Sergeant!"

"We got a room partitioned off in the corner there. We'll fix that up for you. The rest o' this suits us fine."

RED with anger, O'Neil nearly swung on him. As he stood there, holding himself in, a man's face flashed past the

window, yelled at them: "Apaches!"

They went outside. Two Indians stood on the opposite hill, silent and unmoving. Behind them, brush shifted. O'Neil heard the hard clicking of rifles being jerked from the rack in the adobe. He whirled around. "No shooting! One of you fellows take my horse behind the cookshack. Andersen, I'm going over; keep me covered."

"They wouldn't have shown if they didn't want something," Andersen suggested with a growl.

"Yeah. Our necks."

Binoculars strung round his neck, campaign and medal ribbons pinned hastily on his tunic so he'd look big to the Indians, O'Neil walked with slow deliberation up the steep slope. Robert Michael O'Neil, he was thinking, Second Lieutenant, Third U.S. Cavalry, Expert on Dirt-Details and Indian Powwows, and maybe if he lives through this one, Deland'll find him another nice rotten job that needs doing.

He stopped opposite the Apache who'd be chief: the one with the most red—red blanket over one shoulder and wrapped around him, hiding one hand; red flannel circling the lank hair that fell to his wide shoulders; red flannel shirt with the collar ripped off. No man could doubt that here was a man who owned much luck. But the eyes in the blocky, squarish face took away all that was laughable in the costume's purpose: they were old and very wise; and dangerous.

O'Neil glanced at the warriors who rose now from the brush, saw by the tattooed dots on their chins and foreheads that these were bronco Apaches—untamed men from half the tribes on the Fort Apache and San Carlos Reservations—Tontos, Cibecues, Mohaves, Pinal Coyoteros. The medicine man standing next to the chief was Pinalaño, about the same as saying Chiricahua. A bad bunch. Most of them already had vermilion war streaks painted across their faces.

In frontier Mexican, he told the chief,

"I am O'Neil."

He waited for someone to introduce the chief, knowing the old man dared not speak his own name. The medicine man finally said in slithery, chopped Apache: "The white-eye speaks to Par-a-muck-a, nantan of the Coyoteros."

O'Neil worked out the translation and added to himself, Anyhow, of a few Coyoteros. He said in Spanish, "I greet thee in peace, *amigo*."

Par-a-muck-a said nothing for a long while. Then: "A soldier of Nantan O-Neil shot at my son."

"The soldier shot against orders. He has been punished." Light flashed on the twigs of a nearby mesquite and O'Neil went rigid. Schneider playing with his helio!

Uneasy murmurs drifted from Apache to Apache. Guns lifted. O'Neil fixed his eyes on the chief, challenging him, and the chief pretended not to notice the flashing light. The courage of their chief stilled the murmuring, and O'Neil broke the silence to add, "The soldier has been whipped until his back bled."

The Coyotero squatted down, cross-legged in the dust. "We will talk." He let the blanket fall from his shoulder and lifted his hand from the hidden Colt. O'Neil sat down, and a young Cibecue placed a leather of Sonora tobacco and papers between them. They each placed a pinch of the brittle stuff between their palms, rubbed, and poured the crushed tobacco into one of the long and badly cut Sonora papers.

THEY lighted up, smoked, and Par-a-muck-a said, "My people are at peace but must hide their children behind rocks. My people live on the tops of mountains. They die of the cold sickness, sometimes. My young men say we must stop hiding, we must join Gokliya. We have good *petiltows* and the Chihuicahuis will welcome us. This they say."

"American soldiers have better rifles. Geronimo would bring death to thy

young men. The warpath is bad."

"We do not fight the soldier. *Mexicanos, si!*"

And Papagos, O'Neil thought, and Pimas and Navahos, and lone Americans like my two deserters, and Apaches they don't see eye to eye with. "The Great Nantan in Washington has given his word to protect all Mexicans. All people. Your *N'de* too. His soldiers will help good Apaches fight bad Apaches. But because there are bad white-eyes who seek to kill all Apaches, the Great Nantan in Washington wishes your people to stay on reservations where the soldiers may protect them."

The chief was silent longer than necessary. "The Pinda-lick-o-yi speaks with the split tongue." Instantly, rifles centered on O'Neil's chest.

"No, *amigo*. The bad Chiricahuas we must fight. We ask your young men to join us, help trail them into their hiding places. Your young men will be soldiers with fine rifles. Uniforms. Food. Much money."

The chief thought that over, said suddenly, "The little sun that blinks, it is bad medicine, maybe."

"Good medicine, Nantan. It tells things that happen far away, tells them faster than the antelope can run or the eagle fly. But it is strong medicine. When it is angry it can shrivel a man up and set him on fire."

"The white-eye lies, maybe."

"The white-eye does not lie. Many days away, at Camp Grant, there are Arivaipa Apaches. Give me a question to ask them. In two hours, maybe one, the little sun will give you the answer."

The medicine man spoke angrily and the chief gestured him to silence. He said, "Ask what the Aravaipa nantan, Eskimintzin, does today."

"I will ask. And the young men? They will help fight the Chiricahuas?"

Par-a-muck-a stood up. "We will talk when the little sun answers, maybe."

O'Neil rose, said, "It was better that we talked. The Coyoteros are fortunate, for their nantan is wise."

Their nantan took that as his due and made no reply.

O'Neil had reached the bottom of the saddle-back when a warrior screamed something about his eyes and the word *little-sun*.

There was no time to look back. O'Neil dived into the eroded gully, Apache bullets whipping after him. He rolled and slid and fell off into a deeper part of the draw. He heard his men's rifles and Andersen's bull-voice yelling orders. He ran downward, the sound of moccasin-boots pounding down the hill just above him.

His feet hit the talus shale as he whirled and drew his gun. Sliding, he tried to center on the Indian. The Apache stopped and held out an old percussion-cap Colt and fanned the hammer with his palm. O'Neil fired twice. A bullet jerked his field glasses outward and their strap broke. His sliding stopped and he fired again. The Apache grabbed his middle, fell slow and rigid off the hill. The draw's chaparral shook with some convulsive final movement, then stopped.

At the hilltop, rifles cracked and snarled and there was an Apache's—or a soldier's—high, piercing scream. O'Neil palmed the burning sore at the back of his neck where the field glass strap had broken, moved over and dug the bullet-smashed glasses from the shale. His eyes narrowed, and he put his gun away and climbed toward the Apache.

THE cookshack side of the hill was almost a cliff. It took him long minutes—working up from the slim purchase of one sage clump to the next one—to get even half-way to the top. He heard the intense rattling chatter of rifles that told of an attempt to gain the station. Then silence, broken here and there by the angry fire and ricochet that was the Apache name: Pt!-til-TOWWWW. . . !

He clawed over the final crest, cursed with relief at sight of most of his men still crouched behind the wall, sat there

panting in great gulps of air while the sweat streamed from his face. As though through a heat-devil, he watched a man shove one of the loose bricks they'd topped the wall with, narrow his loophole, and again slide his rifle through.

Andersen crawled toward him, reached the limit of the angle of view the wall allowed the Apaches, got up and ran across the yard. "Thought they'd got you."

"How's it going?"

"One man, Craddock, dead. No other casualties. . . . Damn fool, Schneider! He got me so damn mad I near shot him."

"Had some thoughts that way myself. Tell the men to cover me while I move that ladder."

"Right." He turned back to say: "We started with twenty-five rounds per man. That's all we've got."

O'Neil tossed the ladder in place, went swiftly up, and ran bent over across the shaky roof. His hand clenched suddenly as he saw the scared face peering out at him from behind the helio tripod. "Gee, sir, I didn't figure that would happen. I was just sort of playin' with it and then that Indian walked right into the light. Sure am sor—"

"Never mind! Get to work on that thing!" He grabbed a pad of paper from the tripod top, wrote hastily and ripped the paper off. "To Fort MacDowell."

Corporal Schneider read it over, jumped to his feet and began lining up his instrument. A bullet whipped through his hat. He stopped, startled, then kept on making adjustments; and seeing that, O'Neil forgave him for starting the mess. Schneider said, "How long you think it'll take your troops to get here, sir?"

"Tonight at the latest. We can hold." But they couldn't. Thirteen men left, about fifteen rounds to the man, against thirty or forty Apaches that you couldn't see until they shot you. More Apaches than Geronimo had, and there

were five thousand troops against Geronimo. From his blouse, O'Neil pulled two short lengths of branch, thrust one into the adobe-paved roof, laid the other flat with its tip touching the base of the upright.

Cuffing off his hat, he lifted Schneider's rifle and squinted over the parapet. On the top of the opposite hill, a sage tuft moved slow, came to rest next a rock, and a rifle barrel tongued out from it. O'Neil squeezed trigger. The sage bucked and rolled back out of sight.

Off to the left, smoke spurted from rocks. A rifle clattered to the ground below and a corporal swung from the wall, staring at his mangled hand. Andersen jerked him down, and Jenkins began placing slow methodical shots on the side of a rock, trying for the Apache with a ricochet. Andersen stopped him, and in a moment appeared on the roof: "Can't hold."

"I'll try for another powwow."

"Fat chance of that."

"Yeah." He wrote rapidly on the message pad, handed it to Schneider and the helio started clicking. To Andersen he said, "Every man is to reserve one cartridge for himself and keep it ready in his left hand."

"That'll leave maybe ten or twelve shots."

"Fire only at clear targets."

"Ain't seen a clear one today."

SCHNEIDER moaned suddenly and twisted from the helio. "I—I—" He slid down a tripod leg. They ripped his tunic open and Andersen rasped, "High in your shoulder's all." The little corporal said, "The message."

Andersen pulled it from his hand and spelled it out half-aloud: "'Agent, San Carlos Reservation. Urgent. What is Old Skimmy up to today? Reply urgent. O'Neil, Second Lieutenant.' What the damn hell! You get one of my men near killed for *this*? Why, you're loco!"

"Hold it! The answer to that will give us the powwow. If anything will."

He bent down to Schneider, "Can you give me the dots and dashes while I blink them out?"

Schneider grinned weakly. "Sure."

It went slow and O'Neil was afraid he'd garble it, but at last the job was finished and he ducked down. Andersen told him: "Keep playin' with that thing and some 'Pache'll finally hit it, and then how'll we send a message that counts?"

O'Neil glanced at the mirror, muttered, "Playing. I wonder— Here, let me at that again." He loosened the thumb screw that locked the helio's vertical angle, swung the instrument around, and sent the blinding spot of light traveling slowly back and forth over the Apache-filled brush below the crest of the hill.

The sergeant caught on and ran to the roof's far corner. His rifle cracked, and he yelled, "Pretty good, sir!"

O'Neil told Schneider, "They'll be shooting at the helio. Here, take my revolver. You'll have to cover me. Rotten range for a pistol, but as long as they see your shots they won't do much shooting."

The man's shock was wearing off and he managed to get his feet under him. He stood there, swaying a little, the Colt's barrel resting on the parapet. "Gee, I sure never would of thought of using it that way. Light sure does go through those shadows. Picks them out like as if it was a bullseye lantern, don't it? 'Cept a lantern would only work at night."

"Don't talk. Shoot."

Adobe chips numbed O'Neil's face. He forced his eyes open and searched for the Apache with the helio. Light rested on a red blur, the head band. The Colt roared, and the Apache jumped from the chaparral for his death call. Two rifles at the wall cut him down. The helio swept on.

But only one more Apache died. The Indians had slid back over the hill's rim. O'Neil signaled the sergeant, and they left the roof and crawled to the

wall. While Andersen checked ammunition, O'Neal put a tourniquet on Jenkins' arm. He looked at the wall, and looked at Jenkins. Jenkins said, "Yeah," and pushed his rifle through the loophole.

Andersen reported four dead and one man too badly wounded to go on with it. Ammunition, three rounds per man.

"Troop's can't be more than a few miles from MacDowell. Got any suggestions, Sarge?"

"Uh-huh, nothin'." He added sourly "I ain't s'posed to think anyhow."

"Dammit, how come the ammunition's so low!"

"Faversham. Said he couldn't get us no more."

O'Neil nodded. MacDowell was lo on it, all right, and Faversham probab y got all the fort could spare. But, dammit, there were other forts. . . Pulling a dead man aside, O'Neil shoved his rifle through the loophole. Smoke blossomed over there, and he aimed and tried to adjust for the heat-devil's distortion, and whether he hit anything or not there was no way to tell.

WITH so few cartridges it was too much risk. He called a "Cease fire." "We'll wait till they get their medicine made and charge us."

They crouched there, tensed up and soaked with sweat, staring through the loopholes, one man mumbling the Lord's Prayer.

Later O'Neil returned to the roof. Bent low, he went 'round the parapet, studying the posts's precipitous approaches. Not much chance they'd try them. Still, for Apaches they'd be easy enough. He glanced at the L of sticks there on the roof. Sun's too damn slow, he thought. Well, that was a bum idea anyway.

He looked up and saw Schneider gazing at him and holding the revolver out, its loading gate open. O'Neil took cartridges from his belt pouch and passed them over.

[Turn page]

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"Thank you, sir." His wound fumbling his movements, the corporal put three cartridges in the Colt, then one in each shirt pocket and left one in his hand. He smiled weakly, said, "Sure is hot, sir."

O'Neil nodded. He needed something to do and he took the message pad and wrote slowly:

For services above and beyond the call of duty, and while wounded and under fire, I recommend that Cpl. Schneider be posthumously promoted and awarded the . . .

He broke off and looked around, not knowing where to hide the note. They'd take his clothes and boots. Rifle. The helio would be destroyed. His eye flicked over the L of sticks, noted briefly that the upright's shadow still hadn't reached the L's base. Maybe if he hid it somewhere in the cookshack. . . .

He ripped off the note, slowly crumpled it in his hand, wondering now if he'd figured the angles right. Maybe not. Maybe. . . . He jumped up and grabbed the helio. Its light came down, rested on the saddle-back, and shot came from the hill's rim. The reflection moved on, slow, off the saddle-back and down along the edge of the draw, stopped on a scrub oak at its foot. Another shot tried for him.

Schneider said, "Aren't much for shootin' straight."

"They're shooting up hill, that's all. Aren't used to it. Usually have the commanding position themselves." Two more shots, and one slammed hard against the helio's brass base. O'Neil cursed and angled the light onto the oak again. Then he crouched low and tapped rapidly on the mirror's rod.

A minute went by. Apache firing ceased, and both sides watched the blinking light and wondered.

Another minute plodded its slow way, and O'Neil had given up hope when a sudden thin trickle of smoke lazied up from the brush, then a flash of fire, and the oak went up in flames.

In the silence, Helio Three heard low

Apache murmurs travel from hiding place to hiding place. The crackling flames spread fast, and a roaring ball of fire rolled up the gully. There was the danger call, the owl hoot, then quick glimpses of retreating Apaches.

Somewhere in the draw's chaparral there was a death chant. O'Neil ripped his Colt from Schneider's hand and ran to the ladder. He hit the ground, yelled at Andersen to follow him, and jumped the wall. The smoke set him to coughing. The heat's pressure dried his sweat-streamed face into a stiff mask. He followed the death chant, stumbled over the crawling Apache's leg, grabbed it and dragged him back. The Apache pulled a butcher knife out of his boot and O'Neil kicked it from him and finished hauling him out of the smoke.

"Hell," Andersen grunted, "let him burn."

"Catch hold." Between them, they got the warrior to the wall and dumped him over. Eyes fixed on their boots, the Apache sat quiet while they did what they could for his shattered arm.

FINISHED, O'Neil called to the roof: "That message get here?"

"Getting something now. Might be it, sir."

O'Neil pulled out his watch. "About two hours," he commented.

Jenkins spat, said, "Seemed like all day." He lifted his rifle across his knees, spat, and watched the Apache.

A minute later O'Neil was saying in Spanish: "You are to go free and carry my words to your nantan. Tell your people the white-eyes will forget today if your nantan takes them back to the reservation. And tell him the little sun that blinks says Eskimintzin paints his face and makes his medicine, for tomorrow he hunts the deer." The Apache muttered, "This we knew he planned. The little sun is strong."

"Si, it is good medicine, but today it became angry. The Apaches should not anger it. Now go, *amigo*."

[Turn page]

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The Indian was disgraced, and after he told his message the men of his tribe would not hear him when he spoke, for the soldier nantan had not thought him worth killing. But he looked back before he left and said, "*Enju*."

The cavalryman watched the squat figure stumbling off through the hot embers that littered the hill and he thought. *Enju*, it is well. But God help us if they haven't learned their lesson—if they join Geronimo after all.

Andersen returned from organizing the burial party and stood around and didn't say anything. Finally, Jenkins asked the question that was bothering them.

"Took my binoculars apart with my knife," O'Neil replied. "Fixed the magnifying lens tubes in the crotches of that oak, just a few inches off the ground. Broke open that dead Apache's paper cartridges and mixed the powder up with a lot of leaves and twigs underneath the lenses. Then I busted off a couple of twigs that gave me the distance from one lens to the ground and from there to my guess at the focal point on that pile of powder." He nodded at the roof. "Used the twigs to give me the time to pull the stunt. Just an

ordinary burning glass," he laughed. "But the Apaches have it all figured out that the little sun that blinks did the job. Be a long time before they attack a helio station again."

Andersen looked as though he was about to laugh, then his face took on the hard-eyed sullenness that had been so plain on O'Neil's arrival. "Andersen, let's go inside. You and I need to have a talk."

When Andersen left, O'Neil lay down on the cot behind the partition. The all night ride, the Apaches, the long talk like a brother to the big sergeant had worn him out. But his mind was so roiled with thought that he couldn't sleep.

"Get those Apaches cooled down," Major Deland had told him. He'd done that. "Straighten those helio men out." Some of that he'd done; Andersen would likely do the rest. But he felt that what Deland had failed to tell him might have been: "Snap out of it yourself."

Ever since they commissioned him he'd been nursing his anger at the dirt-details. Now, he couldn't figure what he'd been so mad about. They'd just been the jobs other available officers didn't know how to handle. And he'd resented *that*!

Andersen had sure put the saddle on the right horse; the two of them ought to get plenty drunk. He decided he'd been a damn fool, turned over, and went to sleep.

He woke up once: Andersen's bull-bellow out in the yard. "Aw right, we got a new set-up. We finish the month here, then go to the Fort for a month. And *those* little boys get off their hind ends for a change and take your places! From now on, all the stations trade off every month." There were a couple of pleased shouts and Andersen's roar: "Shuttup! We're goin' to have us a little party! We're goin' in that 'dobe and we're goin' to clean up that damn pigsty! And no noise! The Lieutenant's tryin' to sleep.

"Aw r-right, HOP TO IT!"

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HELLGATE CANYON

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Answers to Cow-Country Quiz

(See Page 79)



1. According to Hardin's own story, Hickok got the drop on him and ordered him to surrender his guns. Hardin extended his pistols, butt first, then used the now-famous "road-agent's spin" to reverse his guns. He didn't shoot, however, just made Hickok back down. According to Hardin, this happened in Abilene in 1871.

2. The cavalryman. A cowboy's saddle, while perfect for roping and other stock uses, is not made for racing or jumping and the act of rising to help the horse over the jump would throw the cowboy off balance.

3. Both horses and cattle can, if necessary, go several days without water, but to keep them in reasonable condition they should be able to drink at least once in 48 hours.

4. A "long horse" was a horse capable of making long trips at a good rate of speed.

5. A hunted man, knowing he is being trailed, practically always doubles back on his tracks. Smart lawmen could often anticipate such a move and have the outlaw run right into their arms.

Answers to

How Would You Handle This?

(See Page 11)



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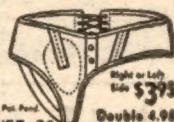
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